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THE WORLD'S LEAST INTERESTING MASTER SWORDSMAN

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Prologue — Lightning Slasher

It was only meant to be a bit of harmless fun. A demonstration, mixed with a little instruction.

“If you’re ready, sir.”

“Very well. Make your move.”

A young man and an old gentleman faced one another with their swords, standing on the palace training field. The two men prepared to fight as a group of dignitaries, led by the king, looked on. Even the least observant of the onlookers couldn’t miss that the two had wildly different levels of equipment.

The older gentleman was protected by metal armor that covered him from head to toe. He carried a magic sword in one hand and a shield in the other. He was, in essence, fully equipped, ready to stride onto the battlefield in the event that a war was to suddenly break out. By way of contrast, the young man was poorly equipped. He wore simple clothing, woven straw shoes, and a wooden training sword.

Youth alone wasn’t enough to make up for such an obvious gulf in equipment. The knight himself wasn’t simply an old knight. He was the Grand Commander of the Royal Guard, still regarded as the greatest warrior in the kingdom despite his age. Known as the “Thunder Knight” due to his skill with lightning magic, the king placed his absolute trust in his skills.

No one watching expected it to be much of a fight.

“Thunder Ray!”

Lightning lanced from the tip of the longsword. Unleashed with all of the elderly knight’s hard-won skill and precision, the bolt dissipated harmlessly as it struck the spot where the young man had been standing a moment earlier.

“Impressive, sir.”

By the time the spell had fired, the young man was no longer in the same location. Making use of his skill “Flash Step” to instantly close the distance, the young man brought his wooden sword down on the older man’s helmet-clad head.

In spite of how it appeared to the crowd, the young man hadn’t actually moved faster than the lightning. Instead, he had anticipated the moment the spell would fire, closed the distance before it triggered, and struck his blow a heartbeat after the lightning spell had even gone off.

“Pardon, but could you bring a stretcher? He’s taken a hard blow to the head. I recommend immediate treatment.”

However, none of the others saw what had occurred in that split second. Everyone present had misinterpreted what the young man had done. That is… All of them were under the impression the young man had cut through the lightning.

“He cut…the lightning?!”

Despite the fact that he had so swiftly defeated the kingdom’s greatest warrior, leaving even the king muttering those words to himself, the young man showed no sign of celebrating, and simply returned the wooden sword to his hip. He held the old man he had knocked out in his arms, keeping the knight from falling to the ground.

The lack of concern in the young man’s stance sent a ripple of confusion and fear through the gathered dignitaries. Had he scoured the field clean with a firestorm or slashed the old knight in two with a mighty swing of his sword, they would have understood what they had just witnessed.

But the young man’s calm, quiet air was so far removed from their experience with soldiers as to border on the alien.

The only exception were the young man’s employers, members of one of the Four Great Houses, the Sepaedas.

“Well done. As to be expected a swordsman in our family’s service.”

“Thank you, Lord.”

The young man knelt at his master’s praise. Despite so thoroughly defeating the Grand Commander of the Royal Guard, his attitude was modest, verging upon servile.

It was understandable that the Thunder Knight’s subordinates would find the display unbearable.

“Your Majesty, if I may!”

The orderlies placed the Grand Commander upon a stretcher and carried him away. At that moment, the Captain of the Sword Company, renowned for his particular offensive skill even within the Royal Guard, stood before the gathering.

“Your Majesty, even the Grand Commander could not fight the ravages of time. Age has dulled his edge.”

The words were a pretense. As Captain of the Sword Company, he knew more than anyone that the Grand Commander’s skills had grown even sharper with age. However, it was a necessary excuse, made so that he would have the chance to redeem the reputation of both his commander and the Royal Guard itself.

“I, the Captain of the Sword Company, lack my commander’s experience. However, I am confident that, in terms of fighting ability, I am already the strongest in the Guard! Your Majesty, I beg you to provide me an opportunity to duel this swordsman!”

The ease with which the swordsman defeated the Grand Commander had left the king in a stunned stupor. Snapping out of his daze, the king turned his gaze to the Captain of the Sword Company, a man he hoped would become the next Grand Commander.

“Duke Sepaeda… Do you accept?”

“Certainly. As warriors, it is only natural that any challenges must be accepted. However, given the agitation of your guardsmen, I doubt they will simply back down if the captain is defeated.”

The Duke had concluded that his swordsman wouldn't lose, no matter how many duels he engaged in with members of the Royal Guard. He chose to press on with a rather extreme proposal.

"Let us say you fought the entire Sword Company. Could you win?"

"That..."

"I will not allow false modesty or servility."

"...Then I am afraid I must state that I believe I could handle the entire Royal Guard."

The Royal Guard consisted of one hundred knights, divided between the Sword Company and the Shield Company. Every member of the Royal Guard was a warrior and spellcaster of the highest caliber, the elite of the kingdom.

To declare that a single swordsman could take them on by himself... That was a boast that the knights could not let pass unchallenged.

"Your Majesty, your permission, please! For the honor of the Royal Guard and the honor of the Crown!"

"...Very well. We shall allow it."

That day, the title of the greatest warrior of the Arcana Kingdom passed from the Grand Commander of the Royal Guard, the "Thunder Knight." It now belonged to a young man who had taken on the hundred members of the Royal Guard by himself, thoroughly defeating them without taking so much as a blow in return.

That young man, a bodyguard of Lady Douve Sepaeda, daughter of the House of Sepaeda, was named Sansui Shirokuro.

Feared as the "Baby-Faced Master Swordsman," none suspected that he was in fact an Immortal, and one who had spent over five hundred years perfecting his craft...

Chapter 1 — The Baby-Faced Immortal Swordmaster

Part 1 — Blessed Meetings

Like every other day, I'm here, practicing my swing. Deep within the forest, I stand here, imitating my Master, practicing slashes with my wooden sword. I'm next to a simple hut, built to provide shelter from the wind and rain.

The rich, almost cloying scent of plant life fills my nostrils with each breath as the sun rises. And still I continue swinging.

I began my practice at sunrise, rising early to check the weather. The seasonal rains are here, but today there's not a cloud in the sky. My regimen takes up the whole day, only ending when the sun dips beneath the horizon.

There's nothing remarkable about this training. The routine is the same every day. It was what I did yesterday, it's what I will do tomorrow. I, an Immortal, have maintained the same training regimen for over five centuries.

As for how I went from being a normal Japanese teenager to an Immortal in training, well, there's a story behind that. You see, God killed me by accident, and as an apology of sorts, he sent me to live in another world.

"I'm SO sorry, but it turns out I made a mistake. See, I saw your name, figured you were an old geezer, and snuffed out your life candle. My bad. That's all on me."

The name that caused this mistake? Sansui Shirokuro. I'll admit that it's old-fashioned, but not nearly enough to justify killing me over it.

Be that as it may, it turned out that I couldn't be revived in Japan, on Earth, so God had already decided to reincarnate me in a different world. Not as a baby, but as my original teenage self.

"Still, I suppose I can't send you as-is. You'd probably just die and come right back."

"Hey, so does that mean you'll be giving me special powers?"

"Of course, my child. You wouldn't happen to have…well, any requests, would you?"

"Since you're asking, I want to be the strongest, and show off my strength to the whole world!"

"I can't believe you actually said that with a straight face."

In hindsight, neither can I. I've had the last five centuries to randomly remember that moment, and the passing years haven't made it any less embarrassing.

I suppose the only really fortunate part was that God didn't simply hand me ultimate power. Instead, he gave me the potential I needed to become an Immortal, then introduced me to my Master.

God didn’t bother explaining anything. After telling me to apprentice myself to a particular man at my destination, he teleported me to a spot deep in the forest.

“I thought I felt a disturbance... Ah, a visitor from another world.”

Master Suiboku did not look much different back then, as though he ought to be in school, rather than out in the woods, basically in the middle of nowhere. Having felt my sudden arrival, he had floated over to have a look.

“Hello, there. I’m afraid you’re a long way from civilization. I’ll take you to the nearest settlement, but it’s not an easy trek. Rather inconsiderate of God to leave you all the way out here.”

“Ah, well, actually... God told me to come here, so I could become your apprentice...”

“...Sigh.”

It was a deep sigh. Far too deep and weary for the child-like figure in front of me.

“Your name, then?”

But it seems he made his peace with teaching me quickly enough, asking for my name without so much as a frown.

“Sansui Shirokuro.”

“A fine name... I am Suiboku, an Immortal.”

“An Immortal...?”

“Yes. You understand the basics, I’m sure. Immortals are the superhuman beings who use the Immortal Arts, cloistering themselves away from the world, and spending their unending days of eternal youth in training. As my apprentice, you must learn the ways of the Immortal, so that you can become one yourself.”

“I can become an Immortal?!”

I didn’t reflect upon it much at the time. I was just excited that I’d get to learn the secrets of eternal youth.

“Certainly. Of course, that is if you can keep up with my training.”

Learning the training regimen put an end to my excitement fairly quickly.

“The training is simple. Each day, you will rise at dawn and swing your wooden sword until nightfall. Every day, until I tell you to stop. That’s all.”

“...Uhm, if I might ask... How will you decide that?”

“When you have become the greatest.”

“And, uh, just how long do you think that’ll take?”

“Mm... Even if it turns out you don’t have a shred of talent for it... Well, five hundred years should be enough to make you a passable swordsman.”

I immediately regretted asking for ultimate power so casually.

I was not, in any way, prepared to spend the next five hundred years taking practice swings...

“That is what it takes to become the ‘strongest.’ I myself have spent the last thousand years training, but each day brings new discoveries. There is no end to one’s training.”

It was such an eminently Immortal thing to say that no retorts sprang to mind.

“The most important thing is commitment. Commitment, so that you may dedicate your life to your blade! So long as you remember that, you will eventually become the strongest! That is the heart of the way of the sword, the way of the warrior!”

The God I met was about the furthest thing from a god that I had ever encountered. Master Suiboku more than made up for it, being the most Immortal Immortal that one could ask for. I couldn’t help but wish he’d ease up just a little bit.

But it was much too late for regrets, and my Immortal training began soon after.

Five hundred years have passed since then. The clothes and shoes I’d arrived in had disintegrated years ago. Instead, I clothed myself in a handmade kimono and wore hand-woven sandals. If nothing else, at least I looked the part.

It’s surprising how adaptable the human mind is. Five hundred years of training had firmly cemented the Immortal mindset. The practice swings and training were now what I did for fun.

The day started as any other. I woke up with the expectation that I’d spend the day training.

“Ah…did you feel it, Sansui?”

“Yes, Master. I believe we have guests.”

It may have just been practice swings, but I’d spent five hundred years training in these woods. I couldn’t help but feel the sudden arrival of new people. Master Suiboku, of course, felt it as well, and we both experienced a tingle of unease. These were the first people to enter this area in five centuries. They were impossible to ignore.

“Perhaps they’ve lost their way. I doubt we would sleep well at night if we abandoned them. We lose nothing by saying hello.”

“Agreed, Master. No harm in checking.”

Master Suiboku and I bound through the woods, heading toward the presence.

Partway in, we detected the presence of wild beasts, only to have them scatter as they felt our approach. Unfortunately, we found what we had expected.

“Hunted by wolves, I see.”

“Seems the wolves fled before they were done.”

Peering down from the canopy of a tall tree, we caught sight of a woman’s mangled corpse. This was only the second person I’d run into since I arrived in this world.

“I’m afraid we interrupted their meal.”

“Yes, that pack has a few young pups.”

Treating man-eating wolves with the same consideration due to people… I admit that, as far as worldviews go, it’s more than a little messed up. Yet, I couldn’t help but feel some guilt for denying the wolves their hard-earned meal.

“One is beyond saving…looks like the other still draws breath.”

“Still a babe, it seems.”

The woman who had entered the woods had died lying on her stomach. The wolves had torn into her several times, and there was nothing we could do for her. However, the baby that the woman had shielded with her body was still alive. We had no way of ascertaining the relationship between the deceased and the baby; all that we knew was that the baby had survived.

“It would be disrespectful to this woman to leave her to be eaten by the wolves. The least we can do is return her to the soil.”

“What shall we do with this baby, Master?”

Having lightly stepped from the canopy to the ground, we needed to decide what to do with the body and the child.

“This babe has no potential in the Immortal Arts, so it should be raised back in civilization. All things have a purpose, Apprentice. Sansui, as both a swordsman and an Immortal, taking time to experience the ordinary mortal world holds great potential value for you.”

“You mean… You wish for me to raise this child?”

“Quite so. With five hundred years of training behind you, your skills are sufficiently advanced so as to be considered unparalleled by ordinary people. Take this child as your own and raise it. Consider it the next step in your training.”

I took Master Suiboku’s words to mean that I had reached a certain level of achievement in his eyes.

After burying the woman’s body with care, Master Suiboku handed the cloth-swaddled baby to me.

“Worry not. You are my prized pupil. With proper use of your blade, you will find no challenge in raising a child.”

“Of course, Master! I will make sure to raise this child properly.”

“Good. In our conception of the scale of time, the life of a mortal is little more than an eyeblink, Apprentice. Return only once you’ve finished your task.”

And so I became a father. But, as Immortals eat no food, I had no idea how to feed my new child.

This left me no choice but to find other people. Leaving the woods behind, I carried the child and began running.

On and on I ran, following a road I found, and eventually coming to settled land. Traffic along the road grew busier, and eventually I came to a densely packed section of the road, where a number of horse-drawn

carriages had come together and caused a traffic jam. I can't deny that, when I caught a glimpse of a walled city in the distance, I found myself picking up the pace. In my haste, I leapt over a carriage without a second thought.

"You there, halt! Do you not see whose carriage you just leapt over? Having a child in your arms is no defense!"

Having cleared the carriage, I resumed my run, but a young woman escorting the carriage began to chase after me with flight magic.

She sped along through the air, driven by gusts of wind that she projected outward from her body. I didn't know exactly how that was done, only that it wasn't an Immortal Art. That, and that she was moving much more quickly than I was.

"From your appearance, I can see that you're not from around here. However, you must understand that your ignorance does not absolve you of treating my liege with such disrespect!"

I'd just left the woods and I was already in the middle of an altercation. Worse, it was entirely my fault. It's not exactly respectful to just leap over someone's carriage.

"Ordinarily, that would cost you a limb…but you're carrying a baby, so I suspect you had your reasons. So long as you make your apologies to my liege, she will certainly have mercy on you. Otherwise, if you choose to resist, it will cost you more than a limb."

"No, no. I will happily apologize, ma'am."

The young woman had instructed me in a noticeably clipped tone. While she looked younger than even I do, given that I was fully at fault, I followed her without resistance. Returning to the carriage, which was parked a short distance back up the road, I sat humbly on the ground.

"Very well, plead your case."

Inside the carriage was a girl who was the very epitome of what a noblewoman should look like.

She didn't seem angry, instead regarding me with curiosity.

"You have my apologies. In my ignorance, I leapt over your carriage."

"…You're forgiven. You may lack manners, but you *did* apologize. If you've learned your lesson, be more respectful toward this crest in the future, and be sure to thank your child."

The baby's presence seemed to put her in a forgiving mood. I had expected something more, like a horse-whipping, but instead she appeared to be content with a simple apology.

"You have my thanks, ma'am."

I couldn't risk upsetting her now. I knelt in supplication, expressing gratitude for her forgiveness.

Seeing this, she let out an amused chuckle.

"Say, Blois. This uncouth barbarian…he might be entertaining if we dress him up and drag him around. At the very least, it appears he's no fool…"

“But your ladyship, to bring this sort of ruffian to your…”

“Blois, I have made my decision.”

“…As you wish.”

She seems to think I’m a teenager, which fits with my apparent age. I don’t want to lie about that, really, but I doubt she’d believe me if I told her my true age. Best to just avoid the subject for now.

“You, your name?”

“Sansui Shirokuro, ma’am.”

“Sansui Shirukuro…an unusual name indeed. Let’s have you take a test, Sansui. You look like you’re not even sure where you’ll be sleeping tomorrow. If you come to my estate and pass the test I give you, I’ll hire you on the spot.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. After all, you’ve got a baby with you; I can’t very well just leave you here. Besides, you still have to pass. Please believe me when I say it won’t be easy.”

Still, that meeting gave me the opportunity to work for the daughter of a noble house. To be fair, the details of the work offered didn’t exactly promise an easy or peaceful job.

“If you are to serve our house, you’ll need to be able to handle any threats that may arise. There is no room for error, so do understand that the test will be harsh. Of course, if you succeed, you will be treated well. Don’t fear; if something were to happen to you, we’ll take appropriate care of your child.”

After arriving at the estate with her ladyship, her father and older brother, treating me as a potential suitor, decided to try to use the test to get rid of me. Specifically, the father instructed the older brother to kill me.

“Kill him before that child tries to stop you, got it? With a single blow. Don’t make him suffer.”

“Yes sir, I won’t provide this scum enough time to regret trying to sully our precious Douve…!”

After subduing them both, while doing my level best to avoid hurting them, they reluctantly accepted that I had the necessary skills and hired me as a bodyguard.

I adopted the baby as my daughter, naming her Lain. With the help of my employer, the noble House of Sepaeda, I’ve been able to give her a decent education, and have raised her for the first five years of her life without any hardships. Of course, in exchange, the work’s been pretty difficult on my end.

Protecting her ladyship is a daily challenge. To top it off, at the succession party, when the father passed the leadership of the family to the son, I fought the entire Royal Household Regiment in front of the King as part of the festivities.

Thanks to that, the Royal Family bears a grudge against me, and the people around me have started looking at me differently. I suppose I might

have enjoyed the attention before I became an Immortal, but now I consider it to be less than ideal.

However, I suppose it can't be helped. After all, that's what it means to live in mortal society.

Life went on, and it's been three years since my fight with the Royal Household Regiment, and five since I was hired. I'm still working for House Sepaeda.

Now that her ladyship is to attend Arcana Academy, I've been assigned to protect her during the move from the Sepaeda Fief to the Crown Lands, then serve as her bodyguard at school.

"Say, Sansui, do you think there will be rabble you can kill around here? Bandits or thieves or the like?"

Meet Lady Douve Sepaeda, my direct employer and the client I'm assigned to protect.

The remarks she murmured, while looking boredly out the window of the carriage, are a fairly accurate representation of her personality.

Over the five years I've known her, she's grown from being a pretty girl to a beautiful young woman, while her personality has remained that of a stereotypical spoiled noblewoman. It's not like this was a new development, of course. She was like that when I met her five years ago.

I can understand her boredom, of course. For someone like her ladyship, who is certainly not an avid reader, the languid pace of a carriage plodding along a peaceful country road must be pure torture. I would have agreed with her, prior to becoming an Immortal.

"Carriages rides are so *dull*. I can't handle the lack of stimulation."

Eliminating bandits and thieves with your own forces... It's certainly an admirable thing for a noble to go about doing, but I had to feel a bit sorry for bandits who got targeted for elimination solely to relieve one teenage girl's boredom.

"Milady, we're currently scheduled to stay at an inn a little ways down the road. If we're to divert from our path, I'm afraid you will have to spend the night in the carriage."

Hurriedly trying to stop our employer is my colleague Blois. Formerly a beautiful young woman, now a beautiful woman forcibly dressed as a male valet.

Wielding the rapier she kept sheathed on her hip, Blois is a preternaturally gifted swordswoman and mage, serving as her ladyship's bodyguard from childhood. Remarkably, before I was brought on, she'd handled caring for Lady Douve all on her own, an impressive feat by anyone's standards.

"If we consider the worst possible scenario... I believe you should stay at the inn."

"Don't be silly. My two precious bodyguards are so very capable, after all."

Yes, as difficult as it might be to believe, Douve, daughter of the great House of Sepaeda, travels with only Blois and I as her bodyguards. On this carriage, moving leisurely through the countryside, are Douve, Blois, Lain, and myself, along with the old gentleman who drives it.

“Um, Lady Douve, are you sure we’re okay? No danger? Aren’t there lots of scary men outside?”

My daughter Lain, still a young child, tugs at Douve’s sleeve, as though looking for reassurance.

Douve smiles reassuringly at Lain. Having known Lain since she was a baby, Douve tends to treat the girl like her younger sister.

“Nothing to worry about, dear. Your papa and Blois are both very strong.”

I would prefer that her ladyship choose to consider discretion the better part of valor, but I suppose that’d be asking for too much.

Blois and I are certainly powerful, it’s true, but having only two guards to look after two people, not to mention the driver, has its risks even just considering the problem of numbers.

“Isn’t that right, Sansui, Blois? You two are my precious bodyguards, after all.”

Abuses of authority exist no matter what world you’re in, and nobles have more authority than most. Douve’s decided she wants us to kill bandits, which means we don’t have much choice in the matter.

I suppose I should be grateful that she has the sense not to just run off on her own, but massacring villains for her entertainment still strikes me as morally questionable.

Still, there’s no one here who can overrule Lady Douve, so we had no choice but to accept a detour from our planned route.

“The sun’s starting to set. Suppose that means we’ll spend the night here.”

“Lady Douve, aren’t you scared of the dark? I’m… a little scared.”

“Oh, it’ll be alright, Lain. Sansui and Blois will keep us safe.”

Glancing out the window, I noticed that the setting sun was dipping below the horizon. There aren’t any street lamps out this far, obviously, so the night is pitch black.

Since the carriage is pulled by actual horses, they still need to be fed and rested at night. Unfortunately, there’s no appropriate place to rest them on this new detour, since we’re currently heading up into the mountains.

It’s clear enough from Lain’s reaction that we’re deliberately heading toward risky territory during a dangerous time of day, all for a lark.

“Sansui, how many bandits are in these mountains?”

“About twenty, ma’am.”

At the moment, I’m regretting the fact that Immortals are able to sense the presence of other people. We’re not heading toward mountains that look

like they *might* have bandits in them. We're actually heading toward mountains that we *know* have bandits in them.

I can't help but wince at Blois's accusing gaze. Still, just because there's bandits in these mountains, that doesn't necessarily mean they'll attack a carriage with the crest of House Sepaeda. I can only hope they restrain themselves.

"How exciting. I hope they bite."

Using herself as bait — pretending to be defenseless, no less — in order to lure the bandits in, kill them, and then toss their bodies into a ditch… It's not exactly a display of artful sensibility, but the 'victims' here are hardly innocents. They've brought their fate on themselves.

"I am looking forward to seeing you both fight."

"I will use the skills passed down from my Master to defeat any who approach."

"Any fool who challenges the crest of House Sepaeda won't live to regret it."

Given their line of work, bandits attacking a carriage are hardly in a position to complain about getting killed. Bandits willing to attack a carriage belonging to the famed martial House Sepaeda? They may as well be asking for death.

Sure, Lady Douve going out of her way to lure the bandits in is a bit iffy, but it's not like she's deceiving them. It's ultimately their choice to attack us, after all.

"Papa…it's all dark now."

"Yes, I see that."

The sun has set, and even the time where the clouds produce a faint reddish glow from the dying embers of the sunset has passed. The sky is filled with starlight, with a few scattered clouds obscuring patches of the sky.

In spite of this, the carriage continues along the mountain path, pausing only once it arrives at a fairly level area.

It's hard to think of a situation more suited for a bandit attack. My daughter is the sanest of all of us.

"…Prepare yourself, Blois. They're moving faster than expected. They've already seen us, and they're amassing."

"They still only number twenty, yes? Then their numbers are of no consequence. Focus on defense; I'll deal with them."

We have the elderly driver take shelter in the carriage, as well. Once the noncombatants are all inside, Blois and I decide to head into the dark woods.

"Papa…do you have to go?"

"Don't worry, I'll be right back. Wait here with Lady Douve."

"…Okay."

My daughter's such an angel. She's such a good girl that I end up feeling bad for her. Why should a five-year-old have to deal with a bandit attack

because her dad’s employer is bored? I think Lady Douve could stand to concern herself a bit more with how she influences Lain’s upbringing.

“Come out here already. I can see torchlight moving in from all sides.”

At Blois’s urging, I draw the wooden sword from my sash and step out of the carriage.

It’s a little early to call it night, exactly, but the sky is already full of stars. Although lit by moonlight, we’re in a heavily wooded mountain pass, so I doubt they can see where anyone else is without their torches.

Of course, that doesn’t matter to an Immortal like me. For Blois, the torches are simply markers to aim at.

“Halt and listen well! Do you approach knowing who rides within this carriage?!” Blois’s voice rings out like a thunderclap. She’s making one last effort to warn them.

Simply letting the bandits go is hardly ideal, at least in Lady Douve's estimation, but our most important priority is keeping her and Lain safe. From that sensible perspective, having them withdraw is best.

"The carriage belongs to Lady Douve, daughter of House Sepaeda! One of the Four Great Houses of the Arcana Kingdom! Recognize you are committing a grave crime simply by surrounding this carriage!"

Blois, who is roaring her warning next to me, has grown in height over the last five years to the point where she's taller than I am. The difference isn't that pronounced; she's a bit taller, but not so much as to completely tower over me. At the very least, she's probably a little shorter than your average adult male.

"Leave now and you may go unpunished! However, if you choose to continue your insults… I, Blois, bodyguard of Lady Douve Sepaeda and—!"

"I, Sansui Shirokuro, bodyguard of Lady Douve Sepaeda, will be your opponent."

While Lady Douve has her dressed in men's clothing, it's obvious to the most casual observer that Blois is a woman. As for me, while the fabric and design is a bit better, I'm still dressed in a simple kimono with sandals and carrying a wooden sword.

I suppose it's to be expected, but the pair of us shouting out and trying to intimidate people was only ever going to draw derisive laughter.

"Blois, I'm sure you've noticed, but they're not backing down."

"Then the time for words is done. House Sepaeda is an accomplished martial House. To draw a blade against its crest… Kill them all!"

Twenty combat-tested and armed adult men, attacking a pair of children. It's an excessive amount of force to use on a single carriage with such a small escort, but with such an advantage in numbers, choosing to attack is fairly sensible.

"Raaaaaaaaah!"

Two children trying to muster a show of force. Easy enough to break that sort of escort, or so these bandits thought.

They roar as they charge toward us, weapons in one hand and torches in the other. Clad in leather armor and brandishing their implements, they surround us, certain of their victory.

The horses drawing the carriage shy and look ready to bolt, but Blois casts a spell to stop them.

"Tornado Wall!"

That's a wind spell, the kind Blois favors. The spell fires as Blois raises her rapier, generating a gale with the carriage at its center. Gusts of wind send the torch flames dancing.

"Th-The hell?! A mage?!"

"Not a surprise from a Sepaeda lackey!"

"Ain't nothing to be afraid of!"

This wind spell doesn't have much in the way of offensive or defensive power. Instead, she cast it to force the bandits surrounding the carriage to pause in their approach.

Magic itself isn't particularly rare in this world. Neither, for that matter, are relatively powerful wind magic users.

Putting it in an Earth-like context, the threat level was about the same as an evidently defenseless civilian having a concealed handgun. More than enough to make the bandits stop to rethink their plan.

Blois is a wind magic prodigy. Her wind spells are substantially more dangerous than a handgun.

"Wind Slicer!"

First, Blois confirms the bandits have been stopped. Once she's sure, she creates a blade of wind.

This is a textbook example of wind magic, the sort of thing I'd dreamed of when I was in Japan. My partner casually weaves together the spell. Spreading around her, it begins to slash through the air in front of her faster than the eye can track.

The spell is far beyond something that might simply hurt or maim the target. Her magic wind has enough force to effortlessly slice a human body in two.

The bandits in front of her that were cowering from the sudden gale die instantly as they're effortlessly bisected. The wind easily cuts through not just their leather armor, but also their steel weapons.

Five of the bandits are cut down by the spell in an instant. That means a quarter of the bandits are already dead. The dead men's weapons and torches fall to the ground, setting fire to flammable objects nearby, though the "material" leaking from the corpses soon puts the little blazes out.

"You have badly underestimated us as the bodyguards of a daughter of House Sepaeda! You will pay for that mistake with your lives!" Blois shouts, in a display of her power.

It may seem a bit redundant at this point, but by now the assumptions the bandits had previously held were thoroughly crushed. Blois alone is capable of killing several of them without any effort. That depressing knowledge is enough to send a shiver of fear through the remaining bandits. The word 'retreat' flickers across their minds.

"Now…fall before my winds!"

A blast of wind erupts from her feet.

Force to support a person, precision to control a person's position, the endurance and concentration necessary to maintain them… Blois was equipped with more than enough of all of that, allowing her to fly effortlessly above the carriage. Looking down upon the torchlit bandits, she began raining wind blades down on them without mercy.

"A-Ahhhh! Screw this! Can't win against a mage that can fly!"

"Bring out the bows and arrows!"

“Don’t be an idiot! Arrows won’t work on a wind mage strong enough to float!”

“Forget her, target the carriage! Take the occupants hostage!”

Well, it’s a moderately more intelligent decision to ignore the flying Blois and focus their attention on the carriage, since it’s still in range. After all, Blois can’t afford to hit the carriage, so targeting anyone near it is a dicey proposition.

The bandits turn their attention back to the seemingly defenseless vehicle with much greater resolve than previously shown.

“OUT OF THE WAY!”

The bandits charge toward me. They’re heading toward me, not for wealth, but to avoid death. That’s fine, I suppose, but it means they don’t even regard me as an obstacle.

“That stings a little.”

The Immortal Art that I use is ‘Ki Infusion,’ a technique that strengthens the weapon in hand. Wooden swords are more than capable of killing on their own, but I reinforce it further before striking my opponent’s skull.

I could feel the vibration of the impact through the sword and into my hand, and with a loud thud, his skull caves in. Confirming it’s a lethal blow, I then grab the next bandit’s head with my hand, blasting him away from me.

The technique ‘Ki Wave’ sends a pulse of force into an object I’m touching. If you grab a person’s head and use it to blast them back, the effect is similar to hitting them in the head with a large hammer, which usually sends them tumbling. With this level of force, however, it doesn’t simply push them over. The bandit is dead before he even hits the ground.

“D-Damned brat’s a Rare Arts user!”

“D-Damn it! Circle them! Circle around them!”

These bandits are irritatingly smart. If there’s only two of us, even with one of us in the air, there are angles we can’t cover. If they can circle around behind the carriage, they can try to carve open an entrance with their weapons, thus getting inside without using the door.

I’m not going to let them do that, of course. I take advantage of their brief pause, as they put themselves on guard against me, and use the Immortal Art ‘Flash Step’ several times in rapid succession. Simply put, it’s a technique that lets me move quickly by taking a single step. It’s closer to short-range teleportation than it is to actually giving me speed.

I can’t use it to move from inside to outside, or between two spaces that are separated by a wall, but getting to the other side of the carriage is as simple as using it twice.

I land a blow to the side of a bandit’s head, just as he relaxes, likely in the belief that he’ll be able to reach the carriage. Running with his hand outstretched, he collapses onto the ground before he even realizes that he’s dead.

“Gah! Ahhhhh!”

The kimono-clad man who was on the other side of the carriage a second ago suddenly appears in front of them. Not only that, but he's killed their mate a few steps ahead of them.

Recognizing this, the bandits try to back away. Blois unleashes a wind blade at them from the air, cutting short their lives.

"Th-That's impossible! How is everyone already dead?!"

The first spell killed five of them. After that, the men furthest from the carriage were picked off one by one. I killed three of them. During that time, the other bandits could do nothing but watch.

Taking down two opponents with twenty men should have been simple enough. But attacking the carriage of a daughter of House Sepaeda, particularly with that attitude, would only result in those twenty men being wiped out in the blink of an eye.

The last remaining bandit wasn't alive because he was particularly skilled at dodging the attacks, or because he was so tough that he somehow endured all their damage, but rather because he just happened to be the last one standing.

More specifically, he was alive because Lady Douve wanted to declare victory.

"…Twenty isn't very many, is it? My bodyguards were so strong that destroying all of those bandits didn't take any time at all."

Lady Douve leaves the carriage after confirming it was safe. She takes a brief look around at the bodies lit by the torchlight and lets out a soft sigh.

"Sansui, is this all there is? No chance of any reinforcements waiting to ambush us?"

I shake my head. No, I don't sense any people nearby. We'd already thoroughly wiped them out. There's nothing around us that could pose a threat.

"Oh…well, that was a disappointment. You should know better than to attack with just twenty men! If you're going to attack my carriage you need to gather at least ten times as many! There's a limit to how much you can underestimate House Sepaeda."

What she says is true. When attacking a House Sepaeda carriage, the attacker needs to have a sufficiently large force to have any chance at all. Of course, we were the ones who elected to travel this way, despite knowing there were only twenty of them.

"E-Eeeep!"

"You know, Blois was as impressive as usual, but Sansui, you're always so boring. I couldn't even get a good look at your technique. Can't you at least fight in a way I can watch properly?"

In my mind, I fought in a way that kept them from even coming close to harming the carriage, but she offers a ruthless critique nonetheless. Honestly, it's more like nit-picking, but since Lady Douve's goal was entertainment, not wiping out the bandits, she's directing her frustration with her lack of fulfillment in my direction.

“You have my apologies, Lady Douve.”

“I beg your pardon, Lady Douve.”

For the record, it’s not that Lady Douve is secretly much stronger than we are. She just has authority over us; in truth, she doesn’t have any combat skills whatsoever. However, she’s also a noble daughter of high rank. Blois and I have no choice but to apologize. It’s hard being a retainer sometimes.

“Well, it’s fine, I suppose. The bandits are really the ones at fault for being so pathetic. I was watching from the carriage window, but what is wrong with you lot? You were so busy panicking that you didn’t show much fight at all.”

I feel a bit bad for the surviving bandit. Not only did his companions all get massacred, he has to stand there and get chewed out.

Evidently, he isn’t up to dealing with this new reality, and so, while still on his hands and knees, is looking for any other bandit that might still be alive. It’s doubtful that he’s actually listening to Lady Douve’s hectoring.

“There’s no point in even killing this man, is there? Looks like they’re just ruffians who started robbing people because they were hard up for money. Blois, return to the carriage.”

“Understood, milady.”

Looking thoroughly displeased, Lady Douve returns to the carriage and Blois follows behind her, leaving just the lone bandit and myself standing outside the carriage.

“Wait...does this mean...”

Does this mean he’s not going to die? Did he just hit the jackpot on a twenty-to-one chance and end up as the lone survivor? The remaining bandit, unable to process the fact that he might actually survive this encounter, sits there muttering to himself in bewilderment.

“Sansui, tie that man up. We’re not going to bother taking him in, though.”

Lady Douve’s voice comes from inside the carriage, but I can’t see her expression. Still, I can figure out her mood well enough by sensing her presence. Not that I have to bother; her tone of voice expresses her mood well enough.

“Leave him to be devoured by beasts along with his companions.”

“Understood.”

We’re not going to kill him, but that doesn’t mean we’re going to let him live, either. He attacked the carriage despite knowing it belonged to House Sepaeda. We did warn them before they attacked that we weren’t leaving survivors.

I retrieve a few leather belts and other miscellaneous straps from the bodies, then make my way toward the last survivor.

“W-Wait! There’s man-eating beasts around these parts!”

“So I see. The smell of blood’s drawing them here.”

It’s not a tasteful thing we’re doing, but it’s not exactly immoral, either. Rather than just kill them for sporting purposes, it’s better to let nature take its course and have the wild animals eat them instead.

“P-Please, help me! I’ll do anything, anything at all! I’ll even lick your boots! I don’t wanna die!”

“Far too late for that.”

We warned them, but they attacked us anyway. The results of that are entirely on them.

I fire a Ki Wave, leaving him immobilized. I’m careful to make sure he stays conscious.

“Then kill me! Don’t leave me to get mauled to death by some critter!”

“I’m sure it won’t be comfortable, but try not to worry about it. Most nonhuman creatures die that way anyway.”

I had already felt the presence of hungry beasts approaching earlier. I’m sure they’ll happily scarf down these bandits. What a wonderful thing.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be over quickly.”

I hope that this improves Lady Douve’s mood a little. Making sure he’s securely tied down, I make my way back to the carriage. By the time I take my seat, the elderly driver has the reins back in hand, and is going back down the road in a hurry. The horses are aware of the predators, too, which is why they’re moving so quickly despite having trouble seeing their next steps.

It seems like it’s rained recently, so the humidity around here is fairly high. The torches probably won’t set off a wildfire.

Despite my opponents being bandits, I feel like I just went on a killing spree, probably because we got out of there so quickly.

“Nothing to worry about now, Lain.”

“Really, Lady Douve?”

“Mmhm. Your papa is back, isn’t he?”

With Lain covering her ears and closing her eyes nervously, Lady Douve very gently informs her that the problem has been solved.

It looks like we’ve managed to avoid traumatizing Lain. That’s a good thing, I think.

“What about the bad men?”

“Blois took down most of them, and your papa took down the rest.”

“Oh, that’s good! Miss Blois is so awesome! And I’m glad Papa isn’t hurt!”

Lain’s sheer cuteness and innocence was a balm for my feelings. Blois and I hadn’t even gotten our clothes dirty, much less getting hurt, but the whole incident was still rather exhausting.

“That’s right, both your papa and Blois are strong. We made short work of those bandits.”

I hide my fatigue and smile over at my five-year-old daughter instead.

The interior of the carriage was pretty dark, with just a small lantern for lamplight. Dark enough, anyway, that Lain didn’t notice how tired I looked.

Happily for us, the unpaved roads meant that the carriage made a fair racket, rattling and creaking, and those noises were enough to drown out any screams that might have come from behind us.

"So, this is the Royal Arcana Academy."

It's the most prestigious school in the kingdom, providing education in every subject under the sun, including magic. Lady Douve will be spending the next few years here.

The Arcana Kingdom seems to be rather large, with individual nobles governing their territories as feudal lords. Furthermore, there are also lands that the Crown governs directly. As the name "Royal Arcana Academy" implies, this academy is located in the Crown Lands. Apparently, the Four Great Houses, including House Sepaeda, have the most authority after the Crown itself, and their territories are appropriately large as a result.

"Mm…not as impressive as I thought it would be."

The first thing she says as she arrives at the school she wants to attend, of course. I suppose that's to be expected of a member of one of the Four Great Houses.

The academy is located some distance away from the capital, and almost looks like it's been deliberately isolated, with no cities or farming communities around it. The land around the academy was primarily open grassland, with a handful of estates scattered around for the noble children attending the academy.

As the highest institution of learning in a country with magic, the buildings themselves have a thick, unnatural aura around them, which I imagine comes from having some sort of magical element built in. The buildings themselves don't appear to be particularly special, at least visually. Certainly not enough to differentiate them from, say, a university in Japan. There's a large number of individual buildings, and they're each rather large.

"What do you think, Sansui?"

"Certainly seems like they're rather well fortified with magic."

"And you, Lain?"

"I think Lady Douve's house is more impressive!"

"Oh, really? A bit anticlimactic, then, wouldn't you say?"

The sheer number of buildings aside, the rituals built into them don't seem any different from those placed on the House Sepaeda estate.

Well, that's to be expected. Even if there are defensive rituals placed on the buildings in this academy, I can't imagine they'd be that much better than the protections placed on the castles and estates of the Four Great Houses.

That's the problem with being near the top. No matter where you go out in the country, there aren't many things that are more impressive than the

things you can get at home. That reasoning might be why I drew her attention and wound up being hired by her.

I also remember just how painful those first few years of constant practice were, the unvarying routine that dragged on day after day. I completely understand how the lack of variation can be stifling. Not that it makes me any more willing to get dragged into it when she breaks her routine.

“Oh dear, is my academy a bit too dull for a princess of one of the Four Great Houses?” an elegantly dressed elderly woman calls over, in response to Lady Douve’s words.

Her hair, while completely white, is well cared for and has plenty of volume. Despite her age, there’s a sharpness to her gaze that dispels any notion that time has robbed her of anything important. She’s carrying a walking stick, but doesn’t appear to need it, standing firmly, with a back as straight as a much younger person’s would be.

“Ah, you must be the Academy Regent, reputed to be the Great Sage.”

“Nothing so impressive, I’m afraid. Just the accumulation of years, instead.”

She was an old woman who had an elegant laugh. A lady of rank and taste, with a title of her own. Blois, Lain, and I stand back.

Lady Douve has no particular grudge against people like her, either, putting on her best behavior, though I feel like it might already be too late, since she started out by voicing her disappointment in the school.

“I am Douve, daughter of the House Sepaeda, and it’s my privilege to attend this institution. A pleasure to make your acquaintance. I look forward to learning all that you can provide, ma’am.”

“Now, now, I doubt there is much we can teach you at our academy that you couldn’t learn at home.”

Despite the mild rebuke in her words, her tone is playful. Blois and Lain both seem at a bit of a loss, but I don’t sense any anger from the two women talking. They’re not arguing, exactly, so much as engaging in a bit of playful banter. We enter the gates to the academy with the Regent leading the way.

Perhaps it’s to be expected, but the scenes inside the academy didn’t seem particularly different from what you’d find in a regular school back home. There were numerous classrooms inside each building, many filled with teachers instructing students.

“Although, if you’re looking for new forms of stimulation, it’s best to come out to the academy, rather than stay cooped up your own lands.”

There’s something about the way the Regent speaks that reminds me of my Master. My Master is also someone who has this particularly languid way of speaking. No doubt he’s still in those woods, practicing his swings each and every day. I feel a faint pang of nostalgia.

“No doubt someone as privileged as you, with no particular responsibilities, has far more time on their hands than they know what to do

with. However, if you can find something that piques your curiosity, well, you'll generally find you don't have enough time in the world to pursue it."

I agree with the observation that an interest or hobby provides you something to really dive into. For all that, though, from an objective standpoint, spending five hundred years doing nothing but practicing sword swings from sunup to sundown probably falls under some definition of insanity.

"I'm a proper old hag now, but there's still so many things I want to learn that I haven't felt even a little bored in decades."

"Even you? Despite your reputation as a Great Sage, one who has learned all there is to learn about the world?"

"I told you, I've just been around a long time. There's plenty of things I still don't know."

With the remark, she takes us inside a specific classroom. Sitting in a chair set before a desk with stacks of documents piled upon it, she begins to stare at me openly.

"When it comes to the Rare Arts in particular, there's much more I don't know than otherwise. There are ritualist instructors in this academy, but as for the other Arts, the most we have are second-hand descriptions from old documents."

The Rare Arts are types of magic, like the Immortal Arts, that don't use mana as their foundation. They're technically not magic, but it's easier to describe them this way than as anything else, so even researchers adopt that particular shorthand.

There are no other Immortal Arts practitioners in this kingdom, so even for a Great Sage like the Regent, knowledge of the Immortal Arts is hard to come by.

"The Baby-Faced Master Swordsman, Sansui, bodyguard to the self-absorbed princess. I've been looking forward to meeting you."

With her difficult personality, Douve Sepaeda is known for only having two bodyguards.

One is the prodigy who wields a rapier in one hand and casts wind magic with the other, the male-dressed Dame Blois. The other is the Baby-Faced Master Swordsman, Sansui, known for being able to defeat any knight with just a wooden sword. With these two at her side, she need not fear any army. At least, that's the rumor Lady Douve has spread through the kingdom.

It's an indication of the strength of her own desire for expression and confidence in her bodyguards. I have my qualms about being called a Master Swordsman when I'm nowhere near as strong as my Master, but she wasn't interested in listening to those concerns.

"If it's possible, I'd like to hear your lectures about your Rare Art here at the academy."

Those endowed with mana still need to learn magic to be able to cast spells. Likewise, those with talents for the Rare Arts need to learn their techniques, or those talents will simply go to waste.

"My apologies. My Master has yet to certify me as fully trained."

I've only been instructed on my practice swings from my Master. Which means, if I were to teach the Immortal Arts, my lectures would consist of doing practice swings from dawn to dusk. It takes decades just to learn the basics of the Immortal Arts. I mean, that's about how long it took me.

I certainly think that I was fortunate in my teacher, but that's only because I came to this world alone. The fact that I had no other connections to the world around me meant that I could dedicate the ludicrous amount of time required to learn the Immortal Arts without distraction.

"Oh, well, that's unfortunate. Still, you can at least show us your Rare Art, right? If at all possible, I'd like to make this an academy where all students of the Rare Arts can come to learn."

Of course, my logic is only sound because I was able to learn the Arts that were best suited to my talents. I can understand where the Regent is coming from. Surely, the cases like my Master and I, where our lifespans grow simply from learning our Arts, are the exceptions rather than the rule.

"About the only Rare Art that is seen as important is Ritualism, with Curses an afterthought, something to defend against. There's hardly any users of the other Rare Arts in this kingdom, so it's extremely unusual for someone to find a teacher like you did. I'd like to give that opportunity to the children who attend this academy, as well."

To not know what talents they have, and worse, to not be able to learn appropriate techniques even if they learn what those talents are…that situation is what this teacher wants to address.

"This is my room. I spend so much time writing that I run out of space really quickly, so unless I take over an entire classroom, I don't even have the space to walk around."

The classroom is crammed full of books and desks. Upon those sit an enormous number of documents. If she's actually written these things out by herself, that's a remarkable achievement in and of itself. Honestly the only way to describe that would be to call her a Great Sage.

"At any rate, I welcome you once again to my academy, Miss Douve Sepaeda. I hope you'll find something that draws your interest."

Lady Douve detests the incompetent and ambitious, so no doubt she'd prefer someone laid back and playful like the Regent.

She sometimes teases her older brother and father, but she usually loses interest after a bit and tries to wander off.

Personally, I think it's a good thing that Lady Douve chose to come to this school.

"Oh, that's right. Miss Lain, you'll be entering elementary school here, yes?"

"Yes. A pleasure to meet you, ma'am!"

“Aw, little one, you’re so well behaved and energetic. How lovely.”

Yup, my daughter is adorable, isn’t she? That she can introduce herself properly is because she’s been raised right, I bet. Of course, about half of that raising was done not by me, but the members of House Sepaeda, from Lady Douve on down.

“So, Missy Blois and Sansui don’t need to do any learning?”

“My Master has already certified me as fully proficient in sword and magic, ma’am!” Blois states confidently. She’s only here as a bodyguard, and like me, she’s definitely not here to study.

Besides, if we were to actually take classes, we would be in different classrooms than Lady Douve, which would defeat the purpose of being her bodyguards. I don’t particularly like studying, and if there aren’t any Immortal Arts classes, there’s no point in me stepping into a lecture to learn.

“I appreciate the gesture, ma’am, but I, too, am here to protect Lady Douve.”

“I see. That’s disappointing, but I suppose it will have to do… Sansui, I was hoping that you in particular could be both a student and a lecturer.”

“Oh, I would be happy to lend him to you for public lectures.”

The Regent was looking visibly disappointed, so Lady Douve, full of her own superiority, kindly offered to ‘allow’ me to demonstrate.

I had figured that was coming. Lady Douve loves to show off her toys, so she was just waiting to pounce on an opportunity to do so. She does believe that it’s rather tasteless to aggressively offer, though, which is true. That’s why she’s so eager to take these opportunities when they do arise.

“That’s wonderful. Actually, there are four Rare Arts practitioners here at this academy, including you, Sansui. I want all of them to hold demonstrations, so I appreciate your cooperation.”

Her precious bodyguard being treated as just one of four… Lady Douve’s a little irate about that, but I think she’s blowing it all out of proportion. There aren’t that many Immortal Arts practitioners out there, which means my Art is almost certainly the rarest of the four.

“Also, one of them looks really similar to Sansui. You might be from the same country.”

…Wait, what?

Part 2 — Rarities

This classroom is huge. The blackboard is equally huge, and it reminds me of the Japanese university classrooms I used to see on TV. It might be more accurate to call this a lecture hall than a classroom.

“You’re all in luck today. This won’t appear on the test, and you won’t make your fortune off of it, but what you will see today is so incredibly rare that no future wealth will ever buy you another opportunity to see it again.”

Becoming a sideshow attraction is also an opportunity that doesn’t come along often, but it’s been pretty common for me ever since I rejoined mortal society.

The academy’s regent introduces me to the gathering. Next to me on the platform are the Regent and three others. Arrayed in front of us are numerous desks arranged in stadium rows, and behind every desk sits a student. There are also a number of professors scattered amidst the sea of students. Even the standing room between the rows is filled with people, and it reminds me of the rush hour crowds back home.

“Today, we are fortunate to have four users of the most obscure techniques known to man, the Rare Arts. Having so many of them in one place at one time is a tremendous achievement and something that this academy has not seen in two hundred and fifty years of its history.”

Not all the students are listening intently to the Regent’s speech. In fact, there are more students peering at us like laboratory specimens than there are those who pay attention to her. Err, actually, they all seem to be staring at me in particular.

“Look, that’s the Diva Princess’s ace in the hole.”

“Huh, he really does dress like that.”

“I heard he used that wooden sword to beat up the current head of House Sepaeda, while the guy was in full armor.”

“The kingdom’s greatest duelist, the Baby-Faced Master Swordsman… A Rare Arts user, eh…”

It goes without saying, but Lady Douve is sitting near the front in the VIP section, looking mightily pleased with herself. After all, one of her precious toys is garnering all the praise and attention from the crowd. It might also have to do with the fact that another young lady, likely from a similarly positioned House, is also sitting in the VIP section, with an expression soured by disappointment.

No doubt, beneath their civil exchanges, they’ve been in fierce competition with each other.

“Now then, let’s have them demonstrate as part of their introductions. First, a foreign princess…from the far southern kingdom of Magyan, Princess Sunae. She practices something known as Beastification Magic…”

“It’s Spirit Possession! How dare you call it Beastification!”

A dark-skinned beauty, dressed in a highly revealing, rather exotic Near Eastern outfit, loudly interrupts the Regent. Her aura is kind of like an Immortal's, nearer to nature than to magic.

"Oh, my apologies. She utilizes an art known as Spirit Possession. Just as users of divine magic are prized in our kingdom, the magic of Spirit Possession is highly sought-after in her kingdom and its neighbors, with only the users of that Art in line to become king."

"That is the case, people of the Far North! I am a member of the bloodline that has ruled the Magyan Kingdom since its founding four hundred years ago! Magyan Sunae!"

"Whoa, she's saying her kingdom's been around longer than ours."

"I'm sure she's full of it. Have you ever even heard of this Magyan?"

"Being royalty isn't worth a lot if it's from one of those barbarian kingdoms…"

The remarks from the crowd are all pretty gross. I don't need to be an Immortal to understand that. Both Lady Douve and Blois used to treat me the same way when I first met them, after all.

Given that Japanese people used to call Europeans 'southern barbarians,' it must be a natural human reaction to denigrate foreign things and peoples.

"Hrmph, we'll see how long your attitude lasts! Witness the power of those worthy to truly be called kings!"

As she shouts to the room, an enormous natural energy surges from inside her.

"O Great Lion, Guardian of our Royal House, use me as your vessel and show your power to these lands!"

Her body suddenly shifts and expands, her clothing growing along with it.

In the blink of an eye, a giant lioness is standing upon the platform, her enormous four-legged body taking up most of the space. She snarls at the already frightened members of the student body.

"Pathetic worms, do you see now? My fangs and claws are symbols of royalty! If you do not fear this power, then I dare you to repeat your snide little comments!"

With her physical growth comes an immense increase in the volume of her voice, and the only response to her demand is a panicked silence. Hard to blame them, since her voice is now basically an intimidating roar.

"Hrmph! Cowards, the lot of you."

"Everyone, you mustn't dismiss other cultures so cavalierly. That is far from the path of learning. I'm sorry, Princess Sunae, but could you restrain your royal aura? The next user won't be able to use her Arts."

"Very well. I believe I have adequately displayed the strength of my aura."

The lioness that had was about the size of an elephant swiftly shrinks, returning to the dusky-skinned woman.

“Look, look, Lady Douve! That’s amazing! A woman turned into a giant cat!”

“Oh ho ho. You’re right, sweetie. How fascinating.”

My daughter, sitting next to Lady Douve, is the only one excited, rather than terrified, by the display. It’s rather remarkable how little really frightens her. I mean, calling a symbol of another country’s pride a giant cat… Still, she’s so adorable, isn’t she?

It seems Princess Sunae doesn’t intend to yell at innocent children getting worked up, because she doesn’t respond to Lain’s excitement. It probably bothers her less because Lain’s not mocking her.

“Next, we have Zuger Saive. Please proceed.”

The Regent smiles over to the next Rare Arts practitioners.

However, at the mention of the name, most of the students and faculty abruptly change their attitude to something akin to disgust and fear. Looks like she’s pretty famous.

“Surely, there’s no one in this academy foolish enough to go on about unproven superstitions before a magic demonstration. Particularly not among the faculty.”

The Regent makes her warning clear, but confusion still reigns. Blois, for example, is clearly on guard.

“She comes from a famous line of Hex Artists. As a member of that bloodline, she herself is a hex practitioner. Now, if you don’t mind, Miss Saive?”

“Y-Yes!”

I can understand how everyone else is feeling. The presence coming from her is profoundly unnatural, even moreso than most magic. This young woman, in her rather thick, lumpy clothing, may seem nervous, but she has an extremely dangerous air to her.

“I-I’m Z-Zuger Seive! I practice the Rare Art known as ‘Hex Arts.’”

“As you are aware, the Hex Arts are a dangerous Art that have, at times, changed the course of history itself. However, to discriminate against its practitioners because of that danger is something only savages do. As a member of this academic community, your responsibility is to properly understand its dangers and its properties.”

With that, the Regent points at a steel sword set upon the dais.

“Today, she will be demonstrating the ‘transfiguration’ hex for us. As you may be aware, this hex is able to turn a tough material like steel into something that is both soft and brittle.”

“Y-Yes! I can do this!”

Zuger waves a gnarled wooden staff, the sort that evil witches use in picture books, toward the steel sword. The staff emits an ominous looking energy from its tip.

“—!”

I hear a sound from her that simply isn't a noise a human voice should make. It's not that it's particularly fast or high-pitched, but the sound itself is so unnatural that it makes my hair stand on end.

"I-It's done!"

"Thank you. Let us see what's happened."

The old woman, smiling happily, almost skips as she approaches the curse-wracked sword. As she picks the sword up by the hilt, the whole of it bends as if made from clay. Despite retaining its metallic sheen, the steel sword can no longer hold itself straight against gravity, bending and warping as it slumps toward the floor.

The entire lecture hall goes quiet. I can't blame this. This Art is creepy. Even if you know what it does, seeing it in person is still frightening.

"Thank you, Miss Zuger. Your demonstration was lovely."

"O-Of course!"

"It was a very valuable experience."

The Regent does her best to reassure her, but Zuger is on the verge of tears. Having this many people draw away from you in fear… Well, that's certainly more than enough reason to be upset.

"Well then, next…"

The other man on the platform has black hair and black eyes like I do. More importantly, he's wearing a jacket that looks like a school uniform blazer. There's no mistaking it, he's from Japan, like I am.

"Mister Mizu Saiga, can I ask you to demonstrate?"

"Of course!"

Not that I can talk, but he's got a hell of a name, too.

There's something about him that catches in my memory, but he's probably a high schooler, around the same age I was when I arrived. He looks about the same age as his appearance, rather than giving off an Immortal vibe. At least, that's the feeling I get.

Still, there's something different about him. He doesn't feel like anyone else I've met before. Feels like he's got multiple types of powers inside him.

"I'm Mizu Saiga. I use the Rare Art known as 'Mystic Arts.'"

"No doubt there are those among you who have seen this before. As you are aware, the Mystic Arts are well suited to defense and include healing techniques. However, we can't have someone getting hurt just to demonstrate those. Therefore, he will be demonstrating his barrier magic instead."

"Yes ma'am… Pride Wall!"

A radiance like the sun accompanies his incantation.

This Art, similar in feel to Spirit Possession or the Immortal Arts, creates a wall of light in the blink of an eye.

That itself isn't out of the ordinary, but the power he emits and the power he has inside him don't entirely match. It's like he chose just a single power from among a number he has available.

“I will assist with the demonstration. Mister Mizu, maintain the wall, please.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The Regent, known as the Great Sage, emits an enormous wave of magic, creating an enormous ball of flame in the process.

This is impressive. Lady Douve’s older brother is also a user of fire magic, but her fireball is much larger and stronger than ever I saw him cast.

“Burning Soul.”

She fires the burning mass without so much as raising her voice. It hits the wall of light, only to have the wall deflect it away easily.

“Oh dear. I actually tried a bit with that, but I suppose that’s how it goes.”

For a moment, it looks like the deflected flame might land in the VIP seats, but it appears she’s in control of the individual embers, and the flames vanish in the blink of an eye. A quick glance around the room shows nothing’s been singed.

This shows extremely fine control on her part. She’s probably not even a hundred years old, which makes it all the more impressive.

“Thank you for the demonstration, Mister Mizu.”

“My pleasure!”

“The three we just introduced will be joining all of you as students of this school. If their Arts are of interest to you, you may approach them, so long as you remember to treat them with courtesy and respect.”

Wait, what? He’s a student, too, while I’m a bodyguard?! I suppose you have to give the guy credit for wanting to attend school, even in a new world. Well, maybe not. Going to a magic school in another world is definitely a genre cliché.

“Oh, and I forgot to mention, Mister Mizu is engaged to Lady Happine Batterabbe, a daughter of one of the Four Great Houses, House Batterabbe.”

Another cliché gets added to the pile. In spite of his calm looks, he’s actually a rather ridiculous SOB. Well, I suppose I can’t really talk.

“I’m also told that he’s in an equal relationship with Princess Magyan Sunae and Miss Zuger Saive. Oh, isn’t youth wonderful?”

Pardon? He’s already dating three women?! Cripes, that really is a pile of clichés.

After five hundred years, I don’t have much in the way of physical lust left, but my old self would have been extremely jealous, or might even feel rather threatened, right about now.

“From the rumors I’ve heard, he’s got other candidates as well… Teehee, Lady Batterabbe seems to have quite a lot on her plate.”

Rather than being treated as Saiga’s fiancée, Happine Batterabbe’s been demoted to a member of his harem. Sitting in the VIP seats, she’s turned beet red and is shaking a bit.

A noble daughter of a Great House, a foreign princess, and a hex witch targeted by discrimination. There’s probably also a very talented maid and maybe a holy woman of some religion involved, too. Just a guess.

Despite seeing it for the first time, it really reminds me of home. It definitely makes me realize I’ve come to another world.

“Hrmph! It’s already decided that Saiga will accompany me back to Magyan!”

“U-Um, I-I’m happy just being by his side…”

Sunae and Zuger also pitch in with clichéd lines that make me feel like I’m watching an anime. It’s about then that I seriously begin to question if I’m actually in another world, or if I’ve been sent to some anime or light novel’s setting instead.

“Oh ho ho. The girls are all over you… how lovely. If I were ten years younger, I’m sure I’d have joined your harem.”

The Regent makes a joke that’s hard to laugh at. Saiga’s looking a bit uncomfortable.

“Finally, let’s introduce the man you all know of. This is Shirokuro Sansui, who will be staying at our academy as a bodyguard to Lady Douve Sepaeda.”

The mood in the lecture hall shifts immediately. The murmured conversations stop as everyone turns their attention to me. I wasn’t trying to become famous, but that’s what it turns out I am.

“I doubt he needs much introduction. As Lady Douve’s bodyguard, there’s not a person in this kingdom who hasn’t heard of him.”

“I’ve never heard of him! Explain!”

By way of contrast to the rest of the audience, the other three on the dais don’t seem to have heard of me. In all honesty, it would have been rather scary if the Japanese Saiga had heard of me, so I’m a bit glad on that front.

“Oh, that’s right. Mister Mizu and Miss Sunae, you aren’t from around here, are you?”

“I-I’m afraid I was a shut-in, so…”

“Since there might be others who don’t know of him, I’ll do a brief introduction.”

I see that Happine Batterabbe looks extremely unhappy, while our own lady looks really quite pleased.

“Despite his youth, Shirokuro Sansui is known as this kingdom’s greatest swordsman. He’s become so famous that he’s known as the Baby-Faced Master Swordsman, and he is reputed to be able to use his wooden sword to defeat a fully-armored knight in a single blow.”

Lady Happine glares at me like I’ve killed a member of her family. Well, more precisely, her gaze seems to be asking, ‘Why the hell is that bitch’s bodyguard so famous?!’

Seeing Lady Happine’s attitude, Lady Douve looks extremely pleased with herself. Wait, did we come here just for this? I suppose she’s from a family of the same rank, making her one of the few rivals that Lady Douve has.

“Say, Lady Douve, are they saying that Papa is awesome?”

“That’s right. Your papa is my bodyguard, and is this kingdom’s, no, this world’s greatest swordsman.”

That’s actually not correct, Lady Douve. I have a Master, and my Master is much stronger than I am. I’ve mentioned this to her several times, but I doubt she’ll ever correct herself. Her attitude on that front was, basically, that she wasn’t the one spreading that rumor.

“It appears he can use a Rare Art called the Immortal Arts, which even I have never heard of before. Do you mind demonstrating for us?”

Uh oh. Most of my techniques are really dull to look at. Hardening my wooden sword wouldn’t get much of a response, and there’s not enough space for a Flash Step.

“Very well. I will demonstrate my ‘Feather Step’…”

I reduce my weight and give a little jump. I slowly float upward like a balloon, touching the ceiling a few moments later.

Everyone’s looking up at me with an expectant gaze, but I’ve got nothing beyond this to show them.

“That is all.”

Feather Step is what Immortals use to ride the clouds, run across water, or stand atop a leaf floating in a pond. That’s all there is to this technique.

I feel a bit guilty as I slowly flutter back down to the ground. Everyone looks rather deflated at just how dull the Rare Arts of the world’s greatest swordsman have ended up being.

Lady Douve, despite knowing it ahead of time, looks particularly displeased. What am I supposed to do, though? The Immortal Arts aren’t supposed to be flashy.

“Snerk.”

Lady Happine Batterabbe can’t hold back a snicker, fanning the flames of Lady Douve’s displeasure.

“Hah! This kingdom’s greatest swordsman can only hop around like some frog?! Surely Saiga can beat him easily!” Sunae roars out, laughing.

Saiga, the guy being compared to me, also can't seem to hide his disappointment. Well, I certainly can't blame him. I bet the old me would have been disappointed by that display, too. You expect some sort of slashing move or something from the world's greatest swordsman.

"That's right. Even the great master swordsman is no match for Saiga!" Lady Happine's also getting in on it. I can't understand why they're trying to turn this into a fight. I thought the whole point was to show Rare Arts in front of the students?

"Oh my, the world really is full of people who have no perspective. I don't know how strong your man might be, but my bodyguard is clearly more powerful."

"How dare you?!"

"Whoa, whoa, settle down. Happine, you're embarrassing me." As the pair engage in an argument, Saiga interrupts in the worst way possible. Not only is he being disrespectful, but he's doing it in public. He might be her fiancé, but saying 'you're embarrassing me' to a noble lady is way beyond the pale.

"But this woman!"

"Who cares about who is stronger?"

I don't care for his tone, but he's saying the right thing. I doubt Lady Douve would listen if I said that.

"Lady Douve, Papa is stronger than that man, right?"

"Of course. It's not even worth comparing them."

Taking advantage of Lain's remark, Lady Douve throws more fuel on the fire. I feel like maybe I should intervene here.

The ladies, ignoring the actual combatants, continue escalating their argument. The Regent seems inclined to stand by and watch instead of calming the situation.

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with a little match. It's important to have some practice to avoid making things all about hypothetical arguments."

Oh no, she just authorized a fight. I can't tell what she's thinking. Maybe she just thinks it was always going to end up this way. That, or she's just looking for a reason to watch more of my Immortal Arts.

"Why don't we move to the athletic field? We'll call it an extension of the demonstration."

Oh, I see. By practice, you meant putting the techniques into practice...

Part 3 — The Match

I definitely suspect that she had expected this to happen. I mean, even though she runs this academy, it can't be easy to take over the entire athletic field, especially without warning.

When Saiga and I arrived at the athletic field from the lecture hall, the stands were already packed with people. There's no way this wasn't premeditated.

"Suppose that's the wisdom that comes with age..."

I didn't think I'd end up cornered by someone four hundred years younger than I am. Though, to be fair, I currently spend most of my time getting ordered around by a woman over four hundred years younger than I am. Having put in the years, I see how mistaken is the assumption about age bringing authority.

As for the athletic field, it's certainly the right size, being much larger than a space for two people to fight ought to be. Checking the floor, it's not grass or dirt, but hard stone. Seems pretty dangerous, actually. You'd get hurt if you tripped on this floor.

"This is the athletic field, where we have chimaeras and golems fight one another. It's quite tough, so don't feel any need to hold back."

"Chimaeras against golems...how sinful."

First, I'm surprised that there are such things as chimaeras and golems. Moreover, while I should be long past the point of surprise on this subject, the depth of human depravity still shakes me a bit. Knowing that untold numbers of artificially deformed lives were lost here makes me want to put my hands together in prayer.

That feeling doesn't last very long, of course, and I put on my game face rather quickly. Regardless of the circumstances, regardless of the opponent, what I need to do doesn't really change. As a retainer of House Sepaeda, my job is to defeat whoever may face me. Since this is a match conducted by mutual consent, the fighting itself is nothing to be ashamed of. Even if, as in this case, the consenting parties aren't the ones who are actually fighting.

Saiga and I face each other from a short distance away. He begins by casting his defensive spells.

"Pride Armor!"

His straightforward defense is a Western-style suit of armor made out of light. Fortunately, his head is protected by a helmet, so all I have to do is hit him there.

As an Immortal, I have a rough sense of how powerful his armor's defenses are. I'm confident I can knock him out with either a Ki Wave or a Ki-Infused blow, so long as I can land a hit.

"...You're not going to attack?"

"I thought you would make the first move."

My plan is to counterattack, so I'm waiting in a middle stance, but it seems he intends to let me have the first move.

“Very well, then. I will begin.”

I originally intended to approach him with Flash Step and hit him over the head with my Ki-Infused blade; however, I see his body tense before I even activate my technique.

He shows no sign of fear, much like your typical clichéd hero. He seems aware that I’m about to hit him on the head, tensing everything — including his expression — as he prepares to guard against my blow.

It may not be modest to say so, but my attacks don’t provide my enemies with any warning. Even when I’m about to attack, I never allow my presence to telegraph my moves. Moreover, at this point, I haven’t actually moved my body.

He doesn’t appear to be panicking at the direction of my thoughts, so he’s likely not reading them telepathically. The most natural explanation is that he’s able to see several seconds into the future.

If the divine arts can read the future, the Regent probably would have mentioned it earlier, so he’s using something else. I can only use the Immortal Arts, but it seems that he can use several different abilities.

To confirm, I use my Flash Step to approach him. Flash Step has a short effective distance, and I can only use it for my own movement, but even that limited application allows instant movement with barely any warning.

In an attempt to recreate the scene he saw, I prepare a helmet breaker. Knowing that it’s coming, he tries to block it with his metal sword. I don’t quite want to end this in one blow, so I stop my strike before it hits his blade, letting go with my left hand. Taking a step forward, I place my palm against his face and release a Ki Wave.

Saiga’s so focused on trying to stop my sword that he can’t react to the palm hitting his face. The technique fires off and rings his head like a bell. His helmet of light doesn’t do anything about vibrations, apparently. He may have read my attacks, but he couldn’t actually respond to them when I changed my plan on the fly.

“...That about does it.”

There’s nothing visibly wrong with Saiga, even as his legs give out from under him, and he collapses. With adequate treatment, he should wake up sometime later today.

It’s pretty common for me to end up getting dragged into a fight at Lady Douve’s whim, so I’m used to this sort of thing. The real problem is that I’m not very fun to watch in action.

To an observer’s naked eye, all I did was close the gap in an instant and land a palm blow against his face. There’s no way that anyone found that enjoyable to watch. The match lasted less than a minute.

“Oh...is it already over?” The Regent sounds deflated as she finally notices that I’ve moved. I imagine she wanted to see an epic clash full of brand-new techniques. The old me would’ve wanted that for sure. Of course, this was actually a clash between divination and aura-reading, but...

“Yes, Madam Regent. It’s over.”

I return my wooden sword to my sash and make my way back toward Lady Douve. The expression on her face is...

“You really are dull. I understand that the results are impressive, but still...”

“My apologies.”

She’s exasperated by the method, but thoroughly entertained by the outcome.

The members of Saiga’s entourage, Happine included, stare open-mouthed from the VIP section. It’s an understandable reaction on their part, what with seeing a man with precognition and magical defenses just fall over after a brief clash. It’s not something an ordinary person could visually follow. Even if they could, it ended so quickly as to leave them entirely speechless.

That only applies to the losing side, of course. The winning side can just celebrate as usual.

“Wow, Papa! You beat him already?”

Lain looks at me with sparkling eyes as I pick her up and give her a few pats on the head. Yup, my daughter is definitely an angel.

“Impressive as always...but why did you hit him with your hand?”

As a gifted swordswoman herself, Blois was able to follow all of my movements. I’m happy she’s impressed, of course, but I’m just as impressed by her. Even if she already knew of my Flash Step, being able to see that I had switched from my sword to my palm, without the aid of a slow-motion replay, was a feat in and of itself.

“He was anticipating my attack. So I decided to go with his read, then switch, to throw him off at the last moment.”

“He read your attack before you’d triggered your Flash Step or swung your sword? Even I haven’t managed that yet.”

“His swordsmanship is amateurish at best... I’d guess there’s something else at play.”

Meaning, that is, he was playing rock, paper, scissors while already knowing the outcome. For example, Saiga knew I was going to go with rock, so he tried to respond with paper. Since I was able to read his intentions through his aura, I was able to see that and shift to scissors.

To be more precise, it means that I went with scissors after he’d already gone with paper. It was, therefore, a foregone conclusion that I’d win. His predictions are only images of the future, and he went with the assumption that things would stay the way they were at that moment he read that future. Hypothetically, if he could read the future with complete certainty, then there’d be no point in doing that in the middle of a fight. If the outcome couldn’t possibly change from what he’d seen before, then there would be no reason to read it again.

The future he sees with his ability changes along with his actions, and I can read what those actions are going to be. If my opponent starts to panic, even when I’m just standing there in a relaxed middle stance, I’m naturally

going to notice that something is off. Therefore, he simply wasn't using his divination ability effectively.

"He was already really tensed up for the coming attack, so I hit him in the face, where he wasn't expecting it."

"Mm, that's remarkable..."

"I still prefer Blois. Sansui's explanations are so *dull*."

Blois is impressed, but Lady Douve tosses in another barb. And yes, I'm sure that's true from a bystander's perspective, but some things are best left unsaid.

"It looks like the Regent is more disappointed than I am, so I'll give you credit for that. Since it seems the classes for today are done, why don't we return to the estate?" Lady Douve says brightly, taking Lain by the hand and walking off. Blois and I follow behind her. A familiar sight, entirely the same as usual.

Meanwhile...

"Saiga~~?!"

Behind us, Happine lets out a shriek and dashes over.

"Saiga, Saiga!! You must have hit your head! Can you hear me?! Don't move!"

Understanding the potential consequences of taking a blow to the head, Sunae hurriedly hops down to the ground.

"Oh Lord Saiga...!" Zuger collapses in place, weeping at the sight.

The members of his harem are all responding like one might expect, in full accordance with the clichés.

"I'm feeling thoroughly excellent. It must be the new environment."

No, Lady Douve, it's the fact that you utterly humiliated someone of the same rank in front of a large crowd.

Still, if he's my opponent, I can't see myself losing. Doesn't matter what the demands are or how many of him there might be, I just can't see it. That assumes he stays at his current strength, though. I'm confident in what I've accomplished over five hundred years of training, but he's also someone sent here by God, just like me. No level of cheating would be beyond belief.

Of course, he'd still have to beat me with those cheats.

"Fufufu... I didn't expect to have so much fun on my first day here."

Having a bodyguard who's a perfect, unfailing trump card, having them fight and utterly defeat one's rival... No doubt, that's a total victory. I understand the feeling. At least, the old me would have felt the same way.

As for me, well, I feel a bit guilty for hurting a child.

"Isn't that right, Blois? Happine's fiancé is pretty strong, isn't he?"

"Yes, he seems to have unlimited potential. It pains me to say it, but I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to defeat him."

The sun has long since set and it's late at night. Lain is already asleep in her room, and I'm about ready to join her.

In spite of that, Lady Douve has yet to dismiss me.

This estate has House Sepaeda guards, and I can still sense presences around me when I'm asleep. There'd be no problem if I were to go to bed, and I could certainly respond immediately, but she still tells me not to go to sleep yet.

I can't disagree that no bodyguard should go to bed before their employer, but I still think people should be in bed once the sun sets.

"Oh my, to have such a man end up so thoroughly humiliated in public…fufufu… So, what did you find? I had you check up on the rumors, didn't I? Has anyone been twisting the truth?"

"No, ma'am. If anything, everyone is saying the Master Swordsman is unbeatable…"

"My bodyguard being stronger than that woman's fiancé…that's to be expected, of course…"

Despite seeming to be a high-level conflict, it still seems rather petty. It must have been extremely cathartic for her, but I feel like she's taking way too much joy in her rival's suffering.

"That Happine's been a constant thorn in my side. As a fellow member of the Four Great Houses, I did have to humor her. Isn't that right, Blois?"

"…As you say, ma'am."

That definitely doesn't seem right. I've never set foot in high society, but even I can tell that's not true. I bet she went out of her way to provoke Happine. There's no need to read intentions to figure that out. The combination of Lady Douve's ordinary behavior and Blois's expression speaks volumes.

"Ah, such a lovely feeling. I'm looking forward to tomorrow."

Lady Douve finally dismisses us, and Blois and I return to our rooms.

Part 4 — Defeat

My name is Saiga Mizu. Until recently, I was an ordinary high schooler in Japan.

“Oops! Sorry about that. I was eating some ramen and accidentally snuffed out your life candle.”

God killed me by mistake and he was going to send me to live in another world. Honestly, I was in such a panic at first. I couldn’t make heads or tails of the situation. I also wanted to ask about the whole ‘lifespans being determined by candles’ thing, but…

“So, look, I’ll make it so you can live in another world.”

And so, the rest of my life was casually decided at God’s whim.

“Got any requests? I doubt you’d understand if I told you to do this or that, and you probably don’t have anything you want to do yet.”

Before I could get my bearings, he began pressing this and that on me.

“I do feel bad for putting you in such a tight spot, so I’ve done what I can to expand the options available to you. Anyway, have fun.”

And so, with that, I was sent to another world.

To put it simply, the thing he gave me was both incredibly simple and way beyond anything normal.

It appears that, in this world, magic exists alongside a number of other completely different techniques. Which kind of power the person can use is decided at birth.

Magic is based on a four-element system of ‘earth,’ ‘water,’ ‘fire,’ and ‘wind.’ This isn’t much different from the attack magic you’d find in RPGs. For example, you determine whether you want to attack one target or multiple targets, or if you want to infuse a weapon with your element instead. There might be slight differences in effect between elements, but it’s still extremely straightforward.

Using magic requires a form of MP called mana, and most people in this world have that from birth. A handful of people are born without mana. These people have other kinds of energy, like ‘Hex Power’ that can cause status abnormalities through using the ‘Hex Arts,’ ‘Mystic Power’ that’s required for casting defensive and healing magic with the ‘Mystic Arts,’ and the ‘Royal Aura’ that’s needed to transform into giant holy beasts using ‘Spirit Summoning.’

This means the Art you can use is already set at birth. Not even the most powerful mage can perform the simplest Hex or Mystic Arts.

That rule doesn’t apply to me. Ordinarily, I pretend I can only use the Mystic Arts, but I can actually also use magic, Hex Arts, and Spirit Summoning.

Not only that, but I have the ability to predict the future through Divination, an art lost to this world, with ‘Time Power.’ It’s extremely

powerful. I can see what my opponent is planning, and therefore figure out the best way to avoid that attack.

I can use a whole bunch of different kinds of magic, and with my enhanced physical abilities, my swordsmanship is also really impressive. With a little effort, everyone around me soon acknowledged my abilities.

Happine Batterabbe, a daughter of a Great House, who can be a bit stubborn at times but is cute when she lets her guard down.

Magyan Sunae, a princess of a kingdom to the far south and a warrior strong enough to make even me struggle.

Zuger Saive, a descendent of a family of hex mages who doesn't really like using hexes, and is a bit shy.

I've also gotten to know many other girls, but I guess that's the fate of someone reincarnated into another world. I'm constantly at their mercy.

I'm attending this academy because Happine wanted to go here, and I now have to demonstrate my mystic arts in front of everyone.

It might be called a Rare Art, but because the mystic arts are the only healing magic available, there are actually a fair number of users, at least compared to things like hexes. I didn't really think it was worth demonstrating, but since I didn't want to deal with any prying questions, I chose to go along with the request.

And it was here that we ran into a Rare Arts user that wasn't part of our group.

Dressed in a simple kimono and sandals, he wasn't from this world, but a Japanese man like me. He's the first person from home I've met in my time here. Since he's called the Baby-Faced Master Swordsman and is a user of a Rare Art, he must have been sent here by God, just like me.

As someone who also died due to God's mistake, I was hoping he and I could be friends, but thanks to Happine's tantrum, I've ended up having to fight him. It's not just Happine's fault, of course. I think Douve's teasing and the Regent giving permission were also to blame for the situation. That Regent in particular is really rather cruel.

This isn't the first time I've fought someone. While there haven't been any Demon Lords or monsters that speak human languages, there are plenty of bad people in this world. There were a few incidents where I would have been a lot of trouble if not for my divining abilities. This means I've gotten a fair bit of fighting experience since coming to this world, but...

"This kingdom's most powerful swordsman, huh..."

Hearing he was also the user of a magic I'd never heard of, called the Immortal Arts, I was pretty excited to see his abilities.

It's true that I have the ability to use all forms of magic, including the Rare Arts, but I need to learn how to use the art, like with Sunae teaching me Spirit Possession, or reading about divination in a book, to actually make use of that ability. I'm sure I have the ability to use the Immortal Arts, so I'd like to learn how to do it, if that's at all possible...

Watching him float around like a balloon did a good job of removing most of that motivation.

“Pardon me for asking before the match… Lord Saiga, are you from Japan?”

“That’s right. You Japanese, too, Sansui?”

From the chat I had with him before the match, he seems like a pretty nice guy.

Even though he doesn’t seem related to the little girl he calls his daughter, she seems to love him all the same, which means he’s not a bad guy at heart.

Still, I have my doubts about his master, this Douve Sepaeda lady.

Sure, in all honesty, Happine bears some responsibility for what happened, but Douve’s taunting was pretty bad, too.

“I suppose we have no choice, as Lady Douve and Lady Happine seem determined to have us fight, but I would prefer not to. And I can’t say I approve of the Regent, who is having us compete in public, despite likely realizing that we’re from the same homeland.”

“Agreed. But since we’re doing this, I’m not going to hold back.”

“Yes. As a retainer of House Sepaeda, I have a responsibility to win.”

The Baby-Faced Master Swordsman… Shirokuro Sansui certainly looks younger than I do.

He and I exchange a handshake.

“Good luck.”

“To you as well.”

Since we’re fighting in front of other students and faculty, I’ll have to restrict myself to the Mystic Arts, but I should be able to use divination without anyone noticing. Besides, the Mystic Arts can be used to create armor of light, making it plenty useful in a fight.

By way of contrast, I have no idea what he’s planning to do with magic that makes him float, but I can’t let my guard down.

It’s hard to believe his reputation as the kingdom’s strongest is all lies, and he might actually have some cards up his sleeve. I found myself excited at the prospect of fighting a strong opponent as we made our way to the athletic field.

There’s already a large crowd in the stands when we arrive. It looks like all the students and faculty from the lecture hall, plus quite a few others, are filling the stands.

“This is the athletic field, where we have chimaeras and golems fight one another. It’s quite tough, so don’t feel any need to hold back.”

From the Regent’s description, it sounds like the Colosseum of Rome.

I can’t help but feel a tinge of irritation. I don’t want to be paraded around like a sideshow attraction.

Sansui looks as he did in the lecture hall, dressed in a simple kimono and holding a wooden sword. It’s such a simple setup that I find myself wondering if he really means to fight in it. I mean, sure, I’m just in my

school uniform, but the weapon on my hip is a magic sword, gifted to me as an engagement present from Happine's dad. When infused with a magic spell, it activates the sword's powerful abilities.

Of course, I can't use it here, since the questions would be a little awkward.

"Ohh! So that's the Swordmaster!"

"Damn, he really means to fight a mystic with that getup?"

"I thought mystics were healers."

"Don't be a rube; in the right hands, mystic spells are powerful in combat!"

The voices in the crowd are a bit irritating, but I do understand what they're saying. Seems Sansui, the man in front of me, is pretty famous. His reputation as the kingdom's strongest is evidently well deserved, and sufficient that everyone here knows who he is.

"Saiga~! You better not lose~!"

I hear Happine's encouragement... Actually, it's really more of a threat. I know that if I lose, she's going to make some unreasonable demands of me yet again.

"Saiga! Win at all costs! A man who is to join our family must be able to defeat the kingdom's mightiest warriors!"

Sunae's encouragement comes through the crowd. Currently on a journey to test her own abilities, I recall her saying something similar before fighting me.

"Lord Saiga~! Please don't get hurt~!"

I can hear Zuger voicing her concern. Yes, this is the kingdom's greatest swordsman we're talking about. I doubt I can get away with just injuring my arm, like I did against Sunae.

"Sansui, as my blade, you're not permitted to show any weakness. You better win, and win with panache!"

"Sansui! Your opponent is strong enough to be engaged to the daughter of House Batterabbe! Watch yourself!"

On the other end, I can hear the cheers directed to Sansui.

"Do your best, Papa~!"

The little girl is calling him Papa. Based on his age and her appearance, I can't imagine they're actually related by blood. She must be adopted.

I guess he has his reasons for needing to win, but if we're doing this, I'm not going to hold back. Even under these circumstances, I'm going to win!

"You two may begin."

I hear the Regent's voice. Seems we're supposed to start fighting here. There's still a fair bit of distance between Sansui and I. It doesn't look like he's going to just jump at me.

I'll start by shoring up my defenses.

"Pride Armor!"

The spell I demonstrated in the lecture hall created a magical wall. This spell uses the same light to create a suit of magic armor.

Technically, it's mystical armor rather than magic armor, but being made of energy, it doesn't weigh anything and I don't have to carry it around. With this armor, so long as I'm not facing something like a Spirit Summoned Sunae, the chances of me getting hurt are next to nothing.

"So that's the armor of the Mystic Arts."

Sansui seems to be observing my armor with interest, while standing with his wooden sword in a middle stance. He doesn't look like he plans to move.

Is he underestimating the armor of light? Or does he have confidence he can break through it? I can't tell, but he isn't moving.

Could it be that he's planning to hit me with a counterattack?

"...You're not going to attack?"

"I thought you would make the first move."

I haven't moved a step since I cast my defensive magic, either. If I keep standing here and doing nothing, I'm pretty sure Happine's going to start yelling at me.

Since I've already hardened my defenses and he hasn't moved, I wanted to give him the first move. It wouldn't be fair if I didn't let him go first.

"Very well, then. I will begin."

Sansui chooses to make the first move.

(!!)

An image of the future flashes through my mind from my divination.

It's of Sansui appearing in an eyeblink, suddenly in front of me and smashing me across the head with his wooden sword.

My armor spell includes a helmet, but the vision shows that his blow goes straight through that defense.

"Crap!"

As I deal with my surprise, Sansui suddenly appears in front of me, as if through teleportation.

Rather than trying to counterattack, I move my sword up to guard my head.

Then, something appears in front of me and blocks my line of sight...and all my thoughts stop a moment later.

After engaging in a fight with the Baby-Faced Master Swordsman, the kingdom's greatest blademaster, I regained consciousness later that evening.

"Saiga!"

"Saiga!"

"Lord Saiga!"

"Happine, Sunae, Zuger..."

Lying in bed with the sheets covering me, I awoke to the realization that I'd lost.

My head hurts like hell. It seems that someone healed me with mystic magic, but since even a healing spell can't remove pain, I could still feel my head pounding.

"Do not try to get up, Saiga. You suffered a hard blow to the head."

Really? I saw a vision of getting my head smashed, so I thought I'd moved my sword to guard against it.

So why…

"Well, he's that bitch's bodyguard. There's no doubt that he cheated!"

"No, on my honor as a warrior, I can assure you that's not the case. That man…he's an amazing swordsman."

Sunae, who is the strongest person I've ever fought, shivers as she whispers those words.

I must have been knocked out in an instant, as I still couldn't quite grasp my loss.

"During the fight, you saw that he was going to hit your head, yes? Even from my vantage point, I could tell. You tensed up immediately. After that, he approached you, feinted at your head, and then hit you in the face with his palm."

"So, Saiga's divination was wrong?"

"No, that man waited to see if Saiga would guard and switched his attack right after."

Looking around, I noticed we're in my room, at the estate near the academy. In other words, it's a place where I don't have to hide the fact that I can use multiple magics, including divination.

"Then, what should Lord Saiga have done? Should he have protected his face?"

"No, Zuger. That man was able to switch his attack after seeing his opponent's actions. True, Saiga's divination can't be used without pause, but even without that weakness, Sansui would have won. Frankly, that man is far too powerful."

I went to guard my head because I'd known he was aiming for it. But he saw that and went for my face instead. Even if I had gone to defend my face, he would have just followed through with his blow to my head.

What if, instead, I had tried to counterattack when he used that technique to close the distance with me? He probably would have dodged that and counterattacked me instead.

"So, he's so powerful that Lord Saiga doesn't stand a chance against him…?"

"That's not true, Zuger! Remember, he was only using mystic magic and divination that time!" Happine says, defending me. It's true, I was overconfident going into it. I thought I could beat him with just mystic magic and divination, but it turns out this kingdom's most powerful man has that reputation for a reason.

"If you use magic and spirit possession and everything else, no doubt you can win! Right, right?!"

“Well, sure…but if they find out I can use all of them, that might be a bigger problem…”

“But it’s still unfair! He only showed the spell that made him float!”

“Uh, in that case, Happine, that also means I was hiding my own abilities, including my divination.”

I underestimated him. And I went into a panic the moment I thought I would lose. That’s why I lost. No, in all honesty, he was really strong. I thought I could beat him if I avoided letting my guard down, but I didn’t stand a chance against him.

I lost because I was weak. I embarrassed everyone and made them worry about me.

“I’m sorry, everyone…”

“Don’t worry about it! Let’s just focus on restoring your reputation! We can fight him again and beat him next time!”

“Yes, that is the only way that you can rebuild your reputation.”

That’s right, let’s try that again. As Happine and Sunae say, I should fight again and win.

“Um…sorry…but does he really have to fight again?”

And, as expected, Zuger wants to stop me.

“Because…isn’t that man ridiculously strong? He’s considered the most powerful person in the kingdom, with everyone from the nobles to the knights to the Regent considering him so, right?”

That’s right. In hindsight, that’s an incredible achievement. It’s definitely odd for everyone to say the same thing about a single person. It’s almost like there’s no room for argument.

“Saiga can do that if he uses all his abilities!”

“I’m sorry! But…um…there’s no reason to fight… I know this isn’t the best way to put it, but Saiga can’t use all of the abilities in front of everyone, right? Then, he can’t fight and win in front of everyone anyway…”

She’s right, that’s true. At the very least, for me to be able to restore my reputation, I’d have to fight him in front of everyone again and beat him, but I can’t use all of my magic in front of other people. In that situation, I’d only be able to use my mystic spells and my divination, which would mean the outcome wouldn’t change, no matter how many times we tried it.

“Then! We can fight where there aren’t other people! And if Saiga wins, we can just advertise the fact that he won!”

Happine makes another ridiculous proposal. But there’s nothing else I can do if I’m going to use all of my abilities…

“Still, do you think anyone will believe that? At the very least, that swordsman isn’t known for enjoying combat. Besides, isn’t that man’s employer the same rank as you in this kingdom? She’s not someone you can just order to cooperate with you. What you’re proposing is declaring that you have something to hide.”

Looks like Sunae’s calmed down a bit and is clarifying the facts of the case. I’m sure Sunae would accept another challenge, and likely Happine

would as well. But would that girl, the one that seemed so rotten, actually acquiesce so easily? While we have a reason to fight, they don't have a reason to accept it. And I can't just ambush them...

"I don't want to say this, but there's no shame in losing to someone who is the greatest swordsman in this kingdom! I would prefer that Lord Saiga not get hurt by fighting in a battle he doesn't need to fight! Honestly, um, I was worried... that he... he wouldn't wake up..." Zuger murmurs with concern, tears rolling down her cheek. I really appreciate her sentiment.

But I still had no intention of stopping.

"I'm sorry, Zuger, but I want to beat him."

"Ah, a good attitude. Worthy of my man."

In contrast to Zuger, Sunae is fully in support of my resolve.

"That means the loss is eating at you. You can't just leave it as a loss, right?"

"Um, yeah. That's right. Do you see, Zuger? I haven't used my full abilities. So I'd like to try clashing with him, using the full extent of my power!"

Despite being fully armed, he beat me with a single blow. The loss is honestly eating at me.

"So...!"

"Lord Saiga..."

I realized I was crying.

The fact that I was humiliated in front of everyone hurts. But more importantly, the fact that I lost without being able to do anything hurt me more.

"I want to win...!"

Part 5 — Rematch

How has it come to this? I'm already scheduled for a rematch with Saiga, despite fighting *and* beating him yesterday. This is so odd. I thought Saiga himself understood the skill gap between us.

"I still don't like you, but I acknowledge your bodyguard Sansui's ability. He really is quite strong."

Unlike the match yesterday, where it felt like everyone in the academy was watching, today's fight will be in a small, secluded forest grove near the academy. This is the equivalent of shouting 'I have special powers that I can't let anyone else see.'

"Oh, really? I can't say I hold you or your fiancé in the same regard."

Not holding back at all, I see. Lady Douve is doing nothing to rein in her disdain or arrogance. I'm not sure if that's wise, given that they're technically from families of the same stature.

"Our Houses are of equal standing, of course. But you and I? We're not equals, just as your fiancé lost to my bodyguard. That's why I'm letting you use the forest for their rematch. I understand, of course... You don't want to be humiliated by losing in front of a crowd again."

It's embarrassing to listen to this conversation. Honestly, I'm glad Lain's still at school. This would set a terrible example for her, though I wonder if it's not too late already.

"Don't think that you've seen the full extent of my fiancé's power!"

"Power? What power would that be? The power to shine like a lantern, then get beaten down by my bodyguard?"

It might have looked that way to a casual observer, but there was still a clash of wits and skill in the battle itself. Of course, most of society is made up of casual observers, and for them, only the results matter.

"Douve..."

"Oh, my. So, you plan to humiliate me, the gracious winner, who was kind enough to take pity on you and come this far out into the middle of nowhere? How impressive you are, to be so thoroughly without shame!"

She's not letting up... But I'm really surprised, too. To ask for a rematch the day after losing... Why is he in such a hurry? Just how confident is he in whatever he has up his sleeve?

"...Um, Lady Douve. Thank you for listening to our selfish request."

"Oh, how polite."

"Yes. I understand full well how much we're asking of you."

"Honestly, I'm a little impressed. Even to my untrained eye, the gap between you two was immense. Wouldn't it be more appropriate to take a bit of a pause between fights?"

Lady Douve is completely right. Blois won't say it out loud, but she's clearly exasperated by him.

“I lost, yes, but I have powers I couldn’t use in that last fight. I can’t back down without using those powers. I know it’s an excuse, but even so, I’d like to fight Sansui again.”

I have to wonder, just what does he gain from this? Even if you win a private duel using powers you can’t show in public, it’s not going to change your public reputation.

“…You’ll win, of course, yes, Sansui?”

“Yes. Merely wielding ‘every type of magic’ isn’t enough.”

A murmur from Saiga’s harem as surprise shows clearly on their faces. That’s about as expected, since that ability is supposed to be impossible. Realizing that what I said was accurate, Lady Douve and Blois also tense up.

Still, I’m certain of victory. It really isn’t nearly enough to beat me.

“Yes, you’re right… But how did you know?!”

“An Immortal can read a person’s presence. There’s clearly something odd about your presence. I could tell immediately.”

“Then how is it you’re so certain you’ll win?”

“I’ll demonstrate that with my blade.”

That he doesn’t understand is proof of his weakness. He fundamentally misunderstands the nature of battle. The others naturally drift away from Saiga and I. Even Lady Douve feels a twinge of fear and moves a little.

“Take as much time as you need to prepare. Such is the nature of this fight.”

“…Burning Spirit! Pride Armor!”

A heartbeat later, his sword erupts in flame and his body is encased in armor of light. That means he’s doing what should be impossible: using the Mystic Arts and magic at the same time.

“The Lone Wolf That Dwells Within Me, inhabit my body and vanquish my foes.”

To that he adds Spirit Possession, and his body itself changes shape.

He doesn’t grow any taller or broader, and instead simply appears to be covered with fur, but I could feel his physical abilities increase.

It seems that he won’t be using any witchcraft. I suspect that curses can’t be used in battle. Even a specialist like Zuger required time to craft a curse, after all.

“This is the full extent of my power. Are you still going to claim that I stand no chance?”

I use Ki Infusion on my wooden sword and wait for my opportunity. I think it likely he’ll attack me if I leave him be, and if he doesn’t, well, I can respond if that comes to pass.

There really isn’t any point in overthinking it. Weighing hypotheticals in your head for this move or that move… All that’s necessary is to do your best in that particular moment.

“Given what you’ve shown me, this will only end up as a replay of yesterday. Are you comfortable with that?”

“…Are you mocking me?”

Yeah, I can understand why he'd be angry. I suppose this sort of thing is what makes me seem old.

"I'm not the same man you beat yesterday!"

No, if anything, I'm starting to think he's weaker than he was yesterday. At the beginning of our match yesterday, he was relaxed and loose. Now his whole body is tense. Could it be that I'm taunting him, like Lady Douve taunts Happine? I certainly hope not; that isn't the sort of master-retainer bond I want.

Even if he's mortal and has a fixed lifespan, there's no reason for him to be in a rush to leap headlong into life like this.

"...This power is power I've gotten from everyone. I can't lose. I can't afford to lose!"

A knight of light with the features of a beast, waving a flaming sword, charges toward me. It's a cool enough visual, but he reminds me far too much of His Lordship when he's trying to kill me.

I read his ki. I watch it flow through his body as he barrels forward. That means I can fully understand the energy that's altering his body.

"Burning Rush!"

If I had to guess, it's a move that involves hardening his body with mystical power, boosting his strength and speed with Spirit Possession, and then executing a running slash with a flaming sword, but...

It means that, no matter how I attack, he's in no position to read my movements and avoid the strike.

I aim a thrust at his mystic armor with my Ki-Infused blade. He realizes his impending defeat a split second before it happens, but can't react in time to avoid it. Losing the initiative after his attack, he collapses.

"Guh...?!"

An Immortal Art and mystic armor... What happens when the two collide? Like in the previous match, the armor itself can survive the blow, but like an ordinary suit of armor, the impact still reverberates through the interior. As my Ki Infusion uses a wooden sword, it hits like a bludgeon.

Given that he was dashing at me at full speed, if I hit him from the front, his momentum is added to my blow, increasing the strength of my counterattack. So long as the blow from my wooden sword hits a vital spot, the number of Arts he can bring to bear against me is entirely irrelevant.

"I hit a vital point. You really should stay still."

It should go without saying, but just as he can't continue using the Mystic Arts when he's unconscious, a hit to a vital spot severely weakens him and leaves him unable to wield his magic. Even striking through armor, I still landed my Ki-Infused blow against that vital spot, and so he won't be able to use any magic or Arts for a while.

"W-Why...?!"

"Tch! He really hit your vital spot!"

"Lord Saiga?! Are you alright?!"

As the unexpected result hits home, Saiga's harem can't hide their panic, and they rush over to help him. Saiga, who has somehow stayed conscious, continues to suffer by refusing to let his awareness fade.

"Don't move, Saiga. The point he hit is vital for Spirit Possession. It can be fatal if you're not careful! But... How did you know where to hit him?!"

"I saw you use your Spirit Possession yesterday. After that, I could see where to hit to disrupt that flow of energy."

"...You're a real monster. But, as a warrior, I have nothing but praise for your skill. Master Swordsman, you are indeed the strongest."

I'm glad she doesn't need any explanation. As a user of Spirit Possession herself, Sunae understands my nature. She instinctively grasps that there's no way for Saiga, at present, to beat me.

"However, you are mistaken if you think this is enough to make the man I've chosen give up."

"Please discuss any rematches with Lady Douve. I am, after all, Lady Douve's bodyguard."

I make my way to a stunned Lady Douve. Her ladyship is taken aback, but so is Blois. They're both surprised at how the result is no different from yesterday.

"How dull."

"Dull as always."

"I wish you wouldn't call it that..."

I mean, yes, it's dull. No doubt they were hoping I'd unveil some new technique, but there's no point in hiding things like that. I'll hide my immortality, of course, but that's different.

"Why... Why can't I win...?!"

Saiga mutters to himself in anguish; he looks like he's struggling to even draw breath. However, he needs to accept that he lost the duel to move forward, and he needs to find the reasons for his loss on his own.

"Listen, Happine, won't you? To warn you ahead of time, I have no intention of accepting any requests for another rematch." With a deeply disappointed expression, Lady Douve lays it out rather harshly. But on this, I agree with her, considering that he did worse than yesterday.

"I let myself hope it would be a bit more entertaining. I'm sorry, but it seems my bodyguard is just too powerful."

"How dare you say that?"

"Look at what happened. He lost to a single blow a second time."

The outcome, a carbon copy of the day before, has left even Lady Douve feeling she'd had her fill of schadenfreude. Why? Because there'd been no progress. You don't have to be Lady Douve to be exasperated by the anticlimactic end, after all that pompous build-up.

"At the very least, could you wait until he's gotten visibly stronger before trying again?"

There simply wasn't anything to get excited about. It was particularly true for me, of course, mostly because Saiga is operating on a

fundamentally mistaken assumption. It's hard to put a name on this feeling. Despite being confronted with a man who can use every Art in existence, there's no hint of tension remaining in the air.

Even though we won, we, the victors head away from the woods feeling a distinct sense of emptiness, and leave the defeated party to stew in their disappointment. This victory felt even more hollow than usual.

At dawn, I resume my practice. In dieting, study, or swordsmanship, maintaining a steady routine is key. Commitment is everything. Five hundred years of training will overcome any disadvantages in talent. Still, given that I had so upset my opponent yesterday, I still have a long way to go.

It's not enough to state the truth. Words are meaningless if the person won't hear them. Words that an Immortal can understand, given enough time to ponder, may as well be gibberish to a normal person. I can't be satisfied with that. Yet, I wonder what right I have to criticize someone who walks a different path from me. I'm a mere bodyguard, after all. Should I be criticizing a man who will marry into one of the Four Great Houses?

"Tch, seems I still need more training."

I'm noticing people's flaws because I want to position myself above them, to view them as inferior. That's not the same as practice, but it tricks me into believing that I'm bigger than I am. Other people are just that: other people. I need to focus on my own flaws. It's an observation I keep to myself; I can't imagine it going over well with Lady Douve.

As the sun rises, I recognize myself as part of nature and get lost in my training. Or, at least, I try to get lost in it. The fact that I'm trying means I'm failing at it. It's like when you start focusing on trying to sleep. The more you struggle, the less you're able to achieve what you're after.

"Still…"

How should I have handled that? Should I have told them the right course of action? Do I even have a right to claim that his mistake is in trying to beat me in the first place?

"No, I certainly don't feel worthy of saying that…"

My conclusions would be hard for them to accept. It completely dismisses his strength as irrelevant, and I don't feel comfortable saying it. At the same time, it's not like beating me would particularly benefit him. I'm not a legendary Demon Lord or a Dark God seeking to destroy the world. Frankly, there's no harm in just leaving me alone. At the same time, I'm still enough of a man to understand that he can't just ignore the challenge I represent.

"I need to stop looking down on all this from on high… The fact that I want to blame Lady Douve for it probably means I'm just rusty."

Just as two rocks may differ in shape but still be rocks, humans and Immortals aren't much different other than in their forms. Lady Douve is the same. Her personality might be shaped a bit differently from other people,

but that doesn't make her wrong or dangerous. Of course, making Lady Douve out to be a villain to maintain my self-image would also be wrong. It would be placing myself on a pedestal.

Ultimately, living with people means you'll always be influenced by them in some fashion. The simple fact that my focus has slipped a bit after spending just a few years back in human society is a sign that I still need more training.

Still, there are times when a single chance encounter or a single loss can end up being the turning point in someone's life.

"Wait, the House Batterabbe party left the Academy?"

Saiga's presence is unique enough that his absence is easy to detect. I can no longer feel him or any of his companions.

I informed Lady Douve of this during breakfast. Obviously, I don't join her for the meal, but instead stand guard over her. Besides, I'm an Immortal. I don't actually eat.

"Guess my teasing went a little too far…"

"It was rather one-sided, yes…"

Lady Douve feels some regret over it. Not only is she sad at losing a peer she could tease, she even seems to feel a little bit of genuine guilt. I suppose that's to be expected.

"In spite of your dullness, you really are the greatest."

"As his comrade in arms, I have nothing but praise for him."

"You really are awesome, aren't you, Papa!"

You're correct, dear daughter of mine. Papa is strong, but he's also not very popular. That is, I'm rather awesomely unpopular. Now that I'm actually the strongest, it's really no fun.

"Allow me to note, again, that I'm nowhere near as powerful as my Master."

"Pretty sure there's something wrong with your master's head."

"…In all honesty, whether he's worthy of admiration is… Well, it's a question beyond my ability to answer."

I mean, the lengths Immortals go to are basically meaningless for your average person. I certainly didn't understand it all back when I started, and now I'm not sure I could explain it in a way that makes sense. All I can say is that there's no end to training…

"So long as he continues on his current path, Lord Saiga won't be able to beat me within his lifetime."

"Yes."

"Indeed."

"Oh, I see~~!"

You know, that doesn't sound like trust. It's more like ennui… Maybe I should pretend to be in trouble from time to time? But I feel like that'd be disrespectful…

“To be frank… Given his ability to use all of the Arts, I have high expectations for him. I have no doubt you’d still beat him in the end, of course, but I’m hoping to see you struggle soon.”

Would that actually be fun to watch? Unlike Lady Douve, my expectations of him aren’t very high at all.

“Oh, that reminds me, Lain. What did you do in school yesterday?”

“I made friends!”

“Really? I’m glad to hear that.”

Yeah, that’s what school should be like. My sweet and innocent daughter shows me the path I should follow. You can study anywhere with a tutor, but you need to go to school to make friends.

“I overdid my taunts against Happine. I’ll be nicer to her the next time she comes to us.”

“I believe that would be wise.”

I suppose this is to be expected. There’s no catharsis for Lady Douve in seeing me win. It’d be different if it were Blois, given all the specialized training Lady Douve gave her from a young age, but I don’t owe any of my abilities to her.

“Sansui, you won’t be going to visit the Regent today. You will be serving in your proper role as my bodyguard. I plan to take a walk around the Academy today.”

This is something my Master taught me. Basically, the reason magic — that is, the Art that requires mana — is so commonly used, despite its strict confines, is less due to the sheer number of people who possess mana and more to that art’s efficacy.

People have specific types of magic they’re better at than others, of course, but being able to manipulate the four elements of ‘earth,’ ‘water,’ ‘fire,’ and ‘wind,’ is just plain powerful, as well as having universal applicability and usefulness.

While it still takes a lifetime to fully master the art of magic, most people can learn to use basic spells after a few years of study. Of course, the fact that you have to dedicate a few years of study to its basic use limits who can actually learn to use it.

For the most part, the assumption is that all nobles and their children can use magic. Members of the military, in particular, tend to be able to use at least some magic, even if they’re not part of the nobility.

“Seeing all this… It makes me realize just how precious those others were.”

Despite being the kingdom’s top academic institution for the Rare Arts, there are only a few Mystic Arts users here. That highly valued trio vanished after three days, after all.

Even if you want to learn a Rare Art, you can’t learn the techniques without an instructor, and for the Academy’s sake, it would have been ideal to have them remain here.

Of course, that feels like it goes too far in the opposite direction.

“Well, I’m sure they’ll be back eventually.”

Harem heroes like Saiga don’t typically lose. They just keep beating enemy after enemy. How do the women around him react when he loses?

Of course, worrying about someone else is just a sign that I’m still in training.

“Putting that aside, I hear they teach swordsmanship at this academy as well… Shall we take a look, Blois?”

“As you wish.”

This school doesn’t have much in the way of a curriculum, mostly because the students who attend this academy have already attained a certain level of social etiquette and basic education. The same is true of my daughter Lain, and so she’s attending the elementary division classes because she felt they were interesting.

As such, Lady Douve is touring the academy to find classes she herself is interested in attending.

“As for you, Sansui, I need you to behave yourself for a bit.”

“Understood, ma’am.”

If you were to ask whether it is necessary to call out when you swing a sword, the answer would be no, it isn’t necessary. At least, for my part, I don’t let out a yell each time I swing my sword. Obviously, that’s also true of my Master.

So why do most of the world’s swordsmen yell out when swinging? Because that’s easier.

Letting out a loud yell intimidates your opponent, frightens them, and makes them hesitate when stepping in. It makes them tense up and takes the edge off their movements. Even that slight hesitation can make an enormous difference in a battle where a split second decides the outcome. That’s because, if you can land a single solid blow, it’s generally enough to kill your opponent.

That’s why you try to make yourself look bigger. It’s very simple to do. All you need to do is gain muscle mass and make a lot of noise. Of course, that’s pretty difficult on its own and requires time and effort, but neither my Master nor I need to bother. We have no need to intimidate our opponents, nor do we need to give ourselves a leg up.

After all, if you can read an opponent’s movement, there’s no need to make them unable to move, and if you know your own size and your opponent’s size, then momentum doesn’t matter. Of course, that’s all very difficult to do in practice. Immortals like my Master and I can afford to spend the decades needed to master that skill, but mortals don’t have the luxury of that much time.

Furthermore, there’s really no need for that sort of strength. Hypothetically, if you were to put my strength at ten thousand and the enemy’s at fifty, is there really a need for me to be that strong?

In all honesty, even during our first duel, Saiga was more than strong enough to claim to be the strongest in the world. While he might occasionally struggle, so long as he fights a single opponent, the chances of him losing are close to nil. Even if there's an opponent who can beat him, it's an open question whether or not he'd ever actually run into that opponent during the course of his lifetime.

The magnitude of my strength is, essentially, close to pointless.

"How does it look to you, Blois?"

"Impressive, as to be expected from the kingdom's highest academy. Their instructors are also all very accomplished."

"And compared to you?"

"No question. I'm better. I doubt any of the instructors or students are my equal."

This is swordsmanship training for male students. The instruction uses heavy practice swords and emphasized physical conditioning.

It doesn't look like this is the ordinary state of affairs. There are several hundred students attending the class, but with a fair number of more portly students for whom this appears to be their first-ever lesson. It's obvious mainly because they're all practicing without their shirts, which is enough to make it clear even to an untrained eye. The body reflects daily life habits, after all.

"I see there are a few embarrassments mixed in."

"No doubt there are quite a few lowlifes who have been drawn here hoping to make your acquaintance, Lady Douve."

On the other side, the instructors keep stealing glances at Blois and I.

As the kingdom's greatest duelist, I'm hardly an ordinary talent, but Blois is no mere genius. This may be the kingdom's highest institution of learning, but no instructor teaching students could be equal to the bodyguard of a daughter of House Sepaeda.

In that regard, Blois and I are famous. The instructors are being watched by younger, more skilled bodyguards in front of a daughter of one of the Four Great Houses. It can't be a comfortable experience for them. This, in itself, is an example of how the act of observation influences a subject.

"...I've seen enough."

With that, Lady Douve leaves the training grounds.

I can't blame her. It'd be pretty unusual to find watching a bunch of boys swinging swords in the blazing sun from the shadows to be particularly entertaining.

"Let's go look in on Lain. She mentioned making a lot of friends. It'd be fun to watch her from a distance."

Lady Douve heads into the main hall. Blois and I follow.

Behind me, I feel the relief radiating off of the instructors and disappointment from the students, but hopefully they learned that impromptu fortuitous meetings just aren't that easy to come by.

I mean, I say this despite having benefited from a meeting just like that, and also despite almost getting killed by Lady Douve's overprotective father and older brother.

"Lain's grown up to be quite a good child."

"Yes. It's all thanks to your influence, Lady Douve."

It's true now and it was true when we first met, but Lady Douve is really good with children. Blois, her favorite, is also younger than she is.

We arrive at an experimental magic class, elementary division. Lady Douve watches over the proceedings with a benevolent gaze.

"It would be too much to say she's like a daughter, but she's very much like a younger sister to me."

"No doubt she'd be very happy to hear that."

Lady Douve looks more lonely than irate, watching Lain's lessons.

"It's so very dull."

Blois and I are on the stoic side, and since we're busy with our training and guard duties, we're never really idle. However, Lady Douve looked truly bored.

"...You know, Happine looked so very happy. I never expected a woman as picky as her to be so thoroughly smitten by such an uninspiring man."

The uninspiring man must be Saiga.

Yes, he wasn't much of an Adonis. It could be that he's impressive to watch in a fight, but Lady Douve didn't have the opportunity to see that, either.

"To think that she's happy settling for being just one of some random man's hangers-on."

"They do say love is blind... Perhaps they met under particularly fateful circumstances."

I nod in silent agreement to Blois's comment. It's probably something along the lines of Saiga appearing out of nowhere to rescue her when she was being attacked by bandits.

My position is a little different, but I suppose I myself am not much different. With a first meeting like that, I can see how it could develop into love.

"So you're saying if I had a similar meeting, I'd have fallen in love with that man?"

"As for that..."

"I jest. No chance encounter could have led to *that*."

I'm not so sure. If I wasn't around, that could very well have happened.

I've heard of plenty of similar situations. Or, really, I can even see the possibility that Lady Douve would be inclined to try to steal the man beloved by Happine, who she views as her inferior.

"Mm, speaking of fateful meetings, we met under such circumstances. Perhaps you're in love with me?" she says to me with a teasing smile.

Unfortunately, I'm an Immortal, and I don't actually have much in the way of mortal desire. I mean, there's no way I could've survived life with

just my Master for as long as I did if I still experienced physical lust. But I doubt she'd understand, even if I explain it that way.

"Not at all. I wouldn't dream of presuming so much, ma'am."

"...How dull. We have a young man and two young women in the flower of their youth, and not a single bit of gossip between the three of them."

I'm sorry, Lady Douve, but I'm actually nowhere near the flower of my youth. I'm pretty much a walking catfish scam, so I don't really meet your expectations there.

With that said, Blois and Lady Douve are certainly of that general age. Although, with that father and older brother looming over her, I'm sure things are rather difficult for Lady Douve.

"To have Happine, of all people, be so fixated on him, and want to be loved, even if it means just being one of several women. Love sounds like rather entertaining, doesn't it?"

I don't want to phrase it this way, but I really don't want Lady Douve joining some man's harem. As she already noted, being a member of a harem means being one woman out of many for some man.

"So, um, I've been wondering..."

"What is it, Blois?"

"Have you... Have you, perhaps, sworn not to love any woman other than Lain's mother?"

Those are definitely not words I want to hear from a co-worker.

It's times like these that I wish I wasn't so sensitive to a person's presence and moods.

Why? Because Lady Douve is looking thoroughly amused. It's not that I find the sudden feelings from Blois to be a problem, exactly, it's that I don't want Lady Douve teasing me about it.

"Not to sound like Lady Douve...but, well, I have always wondered why there's no gossip about you... You haven't changed in the time I've known you...but you're, well, older than Lady Douve or I, yes?"

"That's a good point, and it's something I've wondered as well... You would be around that age, even more than I am, no?"

If by *that age*, she means *five hundred*, sure. I may not be fully trained by Immortal standards, but I'm not young and I'm certainly not of *that age*.

"No, no, I purged myself of those desires when I began training under my Master."

"Oh dear, your Master really is fixated on that single thing. What's so fun about that life?"

"I admire you as a warrior, but I can't hide my puzzlement... What's the point of going that far...?"

The point... Yeah, I suppose there's no actual *point*... But I'm actually pretty fond of this lifestyle...

"Still... I suppose you're right. It'd be hard for you, my retainers, to marry while I'm still unwed myself...but I'm in no hurry to get married, and then there's the whole problem with Father and Brother..."

I suddenly have a very bad feeling.

“I think I’ll write a letter to Father and Brother.”

I can’t quite consider this part of the natural order of things…

“You know, I think I’d be able to love Blois’s daughter as my own.”

The only thing that comes to mind for me at this moment is a cuckoo bird.

Part 6 — Lesson

“As we have some new people in class today, I’ll go ahead and explain before we start.”

In the end, Lady Douve chooses to attend a lecture given by the Regent as her first class here.

It’s a course called *The History of Magic*, which you’d think would be unpopular just based on the name. However, it’s apparently an extremely interesting, highly popular class, with almost every course being full up.

With that said, there’s not a student here who can say no if Lady Douve wants their seat in the lecture hall...

“People often mistake the purpose of education. That is, people want to believe that education is about learning the correct answer. Most people are afraid of failure, which is why they’d prefer to learn from success. Certainly, one of the secrets to success is to learn what successful people do.”

The Regent exudes calm as she speaks from the lectern. She’s working the crowd with her speaking skills, of course, but that’s because she wants the students to learn the content. It’s certainly easier for students to pay attention and listen to an interesting lecture than a boring one.

“However, it’s also extremely important to learn from people who fail. Not in the sense of avoiding what people who fail do entirely, for that is not the way of the scholar. Understand instead that our mission is to ask, ‘What caused this failure?’”

Indeed, she makes good points.

“Of course, there are things you shouldn’t emulate at all. However, the focus in these lectures will be to understand the thought process that led to these experiments, and why they had such unfortunate results.”

She closes the drapes and dims the lights in the classroom, while a device projects images onto the blackboard. It seems it can’t play back moving images or sounds, like a movie projector could, but instead projects fixed images.

“As all of you witnessed the previous day, the Mystic Arts, while ordinarily known for healing the body, are also extremely powerful in combat, primarily because they can create walls and armor. While they cannot match elemental magic in offensive power, it is no simple matter to defeat a knight who can wield the Mystic Arts.”

Yes, that Pride Armor did feel pretty durable; it also seemed pretty useful, generally speaking. Even if there were limits to its durability, it would also pretty substantially increase the defenses of someone wearing standard armor.

“You can, of course, create walls with magic. However, while you can change the trajectory of arrows with a wall of wind, it will only slightly divert even the weakest spear thrust.”

I see Blois nodding along next to me.

Since it’s just creating a great gust of wind, it’d be difficult to divert a blow from a sword or spear aimed at killing a human opponent. It may be possible to create a gust that’s powerful enough to blast a single person, but maintaining that kind of wind-power over a wide area, and over an extended period of time, is very difficult.

The reason Blois used a wind wall against the bandits the other day was more of a feint to gain the initiative. It was just a demonstration of power, intended to show the bandits they were dealing with a magic user.

“The same is true of fire and water. Earth is a different matter, naturally, but it’s also quite slow. This means that, in high-level combat situations, like engaging in warfare, using the Mystic Arts for defense is the most practical method, with standard magic users better advised to use their energies in a clash of attack spells.”

It’s easier to kill the opponent than to try to stop their attacks. That’s to be expected.

“Now, Mystic Arts users are rare, and they are the only ones capable of healing. Even if there is a Mystic Arts user skilled in the art of combat, it’s rare to see them deployed to the frontlines.”

Only about one in every thousand people can become a mystic. While it’s possible to increase the odds through the manipulation of bloodlines, they’re still extremely valuable.

“As such, many mages have tried to find ways to create defenses with the same efficacy as the Mystic Arts.”

With that, a man’s picture is projected onto the board. Like me, he has black hair and black eyes. I get the feeling he’s also from Japan.

“I will refrain from revealing his name. However, he is the unfortunate victim of a misguided attempt in the previously-mentioned vein. Instead of creating a wall of flame, he tried to create flame armor. That is, rather than create a roughly wall shaped object to occupy a specific space, he sought to create armor that could cover his body. That requires a high degree of precision, and I am told that even mystics struggle with it.”

At the next image, I stare in shock. It’s a charred human corpse.

“He burned to death.”

I suppose I should’ve seen that coming. Covering your body with flames… Of course that’s going to end in burning to death. I mean, setting a magic sword on fire in combat is like fighting with a gas torch or soldering iron, so it doesn’t take a genius to see that setting yourself on fire is going to end badly.

And, in response to this, I see Lady Douve double over in laughter. Yeah, I guess the only thing to do with a death like that is to crack up.

“Further, even if he had succeeded, we now know that it would have been pointless. Tests using multiple fixed flame walls on a golem have shown that attacks will simply pass through the fire.”

Again, to be expected. Setting fire to a doll isn't going to make it any tougher. The opponent isn't going to be unarmed, so I doubt the flames from the burning doll would catch them on fire, either.

Lady Douve's stomach muscles are about to give out from all the shaking.

"If the flames used for a flame wall and flame armor are the same, then the application of basic logic would have warned him about the inevitable result. However, the evidence that came from that test is important. Please remember this as you advance in your studies."

I suppose it's a bit like the accident reenactments during traffic safety lectures, but the example is just so surreal that it draws laughter. Of course, neither Blois nor I are laughing.

"This mage's failure doesn't simply stem from the fact that he ended up committing suicide by 'flame armor.' The idea itself wasn't the problem. However, instead of making his own armor, he should have started by testing the concept using dolls, such as golems. There were countless steps he could have taken before he needed to test the spell on himself in practice."

The Regent next projects the portraits of three more mages on the screen.

Once again, they have black hair and black eyes like I do. I have a really bad feeling about this... It's really more of a foreboding, at this point.

"These three did not die. They attempted, respectively, to create armor out of wind magic, water magic, and earth magic. The results, well... The wind magic armor didn't stop anything, the ice armor crafted by the water magic caused severe frostbite, and the earth magic armor was so heavy that the mage couldn't move."

Clinging to her pride as a noble, Lady Douve is desperately holding back her laughter...

"Because of these results, we arrived at the conclusion that creating armor out of elemental magic that can perform like mystic armor is simply impossible. This is something that now has ample evidence behind it, and it has been the subject of extensive confirmation. Without a breakthrough that fundamentally alters our understanding of magic, using elemental magic for armor will remain out of reach."

Sure, it's worth trying something to see if it would actually be useful. Theoretically, at least. I don't know if it'd be worth risking your life over it.

"This served to reinforce our appreciation of the Mystic Arts. In war, one of your first priorities is to avoid getting killed. To my knowledge, with the exception of the Spirit Possession we saw recently, no matter what Arts someone can use, they remain fundamentally human. You, her, myself, no matter who it is... A simple blow from a large enough rock is enough to kill."

Such insight. It's similar to the reason my Master and I use wooden swords.

“This is true not only in combat, but in experimentation. All magic — not just hex magic — is dangerous. When testing magic, you must avoid believing yourself to be an invincible observer akin to a god, and with that delusion, consequently take your own safety for granted. The examples I just gave are meant to remind you of that risk.”

I see, I see. I remember when my Master also explained his teaching methods to me. What makes for a proper training method? A teacher who teaches not just the correct answers, but also what you can learn from mistakes, is a good teacher.

“My next examples, while not as dramatic, are still mistakes that you can learn from.”

Again, black hair and black eyes. I’m starting to see a bit of malice behind these choices. At the very least, it feels like Lady Douve and Blois are glancing in my direction…

“The strength of earth magic lies in its weight. While creating rock and hitting the target with it may sound simple, it has plenty of power behind it. It takes time to activate and it isn’t particularly fast, but it’s impossible to guard against with anything other than the Mystic Arts. A wall of wind will do little to deflect it, and a flame wall would, if anything, increase its power. It’s possible to create ice with water magic, but as you know, this takes a substantial amount of time. Further, if the ice wall isn’t anchored to the ground, there’s a possibility that it can collapse in on you instead.”

Next, a drawing — rather than a photograph — is projected to the board. It’s an extremely simple drawing that uses stick figures.

“His proposal was as follows. Use wind magic to travel high up into the air, use earth magic there to create mud and boulders, and then drop them. He planned to use this method to destroy targets like enemy fortifications.”

“Not possible,” Blois says from next to me.

Given that she’s able to fly using wind magic, if she says it’s impossible, it must be impossible.

“He tried to do everything on his own. As a result, he first focused on gaining enough skill in wind magic to fly up into the air. However, as a result, it took him a long time to learn earth magic. This is for the reasons you already know.”

For example, let’s say you learned how to cast fire magic so you could create a fireball. From there, you would then learn other fire spells, such as those that create larger balls of fire, engulf your blade in fire, create flame walls, and use a jet of flame to push you forward.

That’s the general order in which a fire mage learns their spells, and that’s true of users of other types of magic, as well. They begin with the basics, learn specific applications of that magic, and develop it from there.

Then, after that, what do you need to learn other types of magic? The only option is to learn them from the most basic level, as before.

Therefore, even if you master wind magic, you’re effectively a novice in the other forms of magic. While it’s not impossible to acquire those other

skills, like it would be with the Mystic Arts or Immortal Arts, it does require substantial time and effort.

For that reason, most mages focus on mastering a single type of magic. Life is short and time is finite. Being able to do a single thing well is more valuable than being able to do a little bit of everything.

“With that being the case, he asked for help from an earth mage. He planned to use his wind magic to raise an earth mage into the air, and thus divide the responsibilities. However… This also ended in failure.”

The next drawing showed a large circle becoming smaller as it got lower, eventually disappearing near the bottom.

“As you are all aware, magic has both a maintenance cost and a maximum range. The further away from the spellcaster the spell gets, the weaker and smaller it becomes. This is also true of earth magic. If you drop a magically created boulder from the air, far above the ground, the boulder vanishes by the time it hits the ground.”

Lady Douve is laughing again. Silently, this time.

“Of course, this wouldn’t be the case if you were to lift an actual rock with wind magic and drop it, but you’d need several dozen wind mages to do this, at which point it’d just be simpler to use a trebuchet. And so this idea fell apart.”

Maybe he should have dropped a bomb. Well, wait, I suppose that’d be difficult, too. I’m pretty sure it’d take a certain level of technology to build bombs that detonate on impact instead of with a fixed fuse. And even then, that still doesn’t solve the problem of weight.

It’s also questionable if bombs even exist in this world.

“To make his plan work, it would be necessary to drop the earth mage along with the boulder. It might be pretty powerful, but the mage would die, obviously, and you’d end up with a result that wasn’t much different from just using a trebuchet.”

Lady Douve, please don’t ask if there aren’t any tests of *that* idea…

“By digging down into the records of the many people who came before us, we can understand the things we can and can’t do, and why we can’t do them.”

“This is such a wonderful class!”

Yes, Lady Douve, I agree, but...

I suppose this is a good example of how being remembered by future generations isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. I mean, it might be helping people, but to end up being laughed at, long after you’re dead...

“Is being scatterbrained part of being from your country…?”

Don’t say that, Blois. I sure can’t deny it. I mean, Saiga’s definitely pretty scatterbrained…

I suppose this goes without saying now, but in general, Lain, Lady Douve, Blois, and I have known each other for a pretty long time. And, as a

matter of course, we don’t really interact with other people outside that circle.

That’s why it’s not particularly surprising that Blois is in love with me, or at least has special feelings for me. It can’t be helped; there’s no one else.

But, as Blois understands, I don’t feel anything in particular for her.

“…I, ahm, that is, I apologize for what I said the other day.”

“Hm? Don’t worry about it. It doesn’t bother me in the least.”

“I sort of wish you would mind, at least a little bit…”

On a day without classes, Blois and I are chatting in one of the hallways of Lady Douve’s estate. That is, we’re in the middle of a bit of watercooler talk. Because Lady Douve mentioned she wanted to read by herself, the two of us have a bit of time to ourselves.

I do wish Blois would notice that Lady Douve and Lain are smirking broadly while they eavesdrop on our conversation from down the hall, though. I don’t even need to use my Immortal Arts to see them. Lain in particular is fidgeting restlessly.

“And… You’re good at reading people’s auras and knowing their feelings. So… I imagine that, well, you know what I’m feeling.”

“Well, sure…”

“It’s not like I’ve always had these feelings. That is to say, it’s not like I felt this giddiness about you all this time. I wanted to make sure you knew that, at least!”

“It’s alright. I know.”

Her change in feelings did surprise me. Until now, I had only felt things like trust, admiration, and jealousy from Blois’s presence.

Once Lady Douve started talking about things like love, she started carrying around things like uncertainty and fear. It was pretty sudden, and she seems quite surprised by it herself.

“To think that, well, that is… You might, possibly, maybe… Become someone else’s man… I started feeling a bit afraid…”

“I see… Well, try not to worry about it. Like I said the other day, I don’t have any desires of that sort. If I can be blunt, the only kind of physical desire I really have is for sleep…”

“Thinking about it, you do look really sleepy at night. I guess you’re still a little child-like in that sense.”

“Hold on, now. Nights are for sleeping.”

Wake up at sunrise, go to sleep after sunset. That’s the proper lifestyle for a diurnal animal. Of course, since I don’t eat or drink, I admit I’m thoroughly unnatural. I have to wonder about what it means to be so in tune with nature that you end up being unnatural.

“…Thinking about it, I don’t really know anything about you, other than how strong you are.”

“Well sure… That’s true of both of us. I didn’t have much interest in you, either.”

“I suppose that’s true… I guess we stay out of each other’s business, usually.”

“I rather value that sort of relationship, both with you and with Lady Douve. She accepted Lain and me into the fold without prying into our past.”

Despite it all, House Sepaeda and I have similar values. I wouldn’t say it’s a good thing, but my idea of “people I *can* kill” and “people I *should* kill” are the same as House Sepaeda’s.

No matter how strong an Immortal might be, they’re still a rootless wanderer. No doubt they could force me to do unsavory work, but instead they’re content to put me in an important position like being their daughter’s bodyguard. I’m pretty fortunate to be able to work for a House like that.

“…Eh?”

Just as I think that, I detect a couple of presences that I really don’t want to sense anywhere near me.

“What’s wrong? You look pale.”

“Their lordships are approaching with an army in tow…”

“What?! I mean, yes, I’d heard that their lordships were in the capital…but with an army?!”

“Yes. I can feel their rage from here.”

I have my suspicions as to the cause. It must be the letters Lady Douve sent them.

The contents must have been enough to drive the two into a frenzy. No, more accurately, she must have phrased those contents in such a way as to intentionally anger them.

“Oh, such bad timing.”

“Lady Douve, are Lord Grandpa and Lord Uncle coming here?”

“Seems like it… Guess we should get some tea ready.”

Lain is innocently asking Lady Douve a question from the corner of the hallway they’d been hiding around, but this is hardly the time for them to be discussing things so casually. Blois and I couldn’t perceive the situation as anything less than a serious problem.

Led by Lady Douve, Blois, Lain, and I are about to welcome an army at the front gate.

The horses are kicking up enough dust that we can see them from quite a distance away, and we can even hear the ground rumbling beneath their hooves.

“Just to confirm, that is their lordships? If they approach and it isn’t them, we can’t just write that off as a mistake.”

“Now, Blois, they’re carrying the banner of House Sepaeda. That can’t be anyone but Father and Brother.”

Blois understands my presence-sensing abilities, but she still can’t help but feel a pang of dread at seeing the approaching forces. Considering the

hostility radiating from the pair in front, it's understandable that she'd have concerns about being wrong.

Of course, I'm not exactly thrilled by the thought. They're my employers. As for Lady Douve, she has no doubt that two are her father and brother.

"I see… Still, that's not exactly the way they should be approaching the estate of their younger sister or daughter…"

"Not to worry, Blois. Only the pair in front are out for blood. The other knights don't want to fight."

""Diiiiiiiiieeeee!!""

Actually, the two in front are putting out a truly excessive amount of hostility. The rage they're broadcasting might be enough to make you believe that the rest of the cavalry is out for blood, too.

"They're not even trying to hide their intentions… Are you sure it's fine?"

"How frightening! What shall we do! Father and Brother have both lost their minds!"

Lady Douve ostentatiously pretends to be frightened, of course, but it is a perfect summary of this situation. They're clearly not in their right minds. Of course, I'm pretty sure that Lady Douve's the reason they've gone mad with rage. Please, Lady Douve, don't taunt them when you know full well that's how they'll react.

"Papa… I'm scared."

Lain is actually frightened. For good reason; even adults would find this scary.

"Oh my, such madness! They're frightening a young child… Sansui, could you go calm Father and Brother? Help them cool their heads?"

To translate, she wants me to take my wooden sword, go smack the fully armored knights leading a charging horde toward the estate, and drag them back to the house, without killing them.

It's business as usual, but still a lot to ask, albeit not that difficult for me to pull off.

"Yes, milady."

At this rate, they might very well slam into the estate with the cavalry in tow. That in itself is a risk to their lives.

Yes, yes, there's a pressing need to calm them down a bit. Of course, it's a bit of a brute-force solution…

"Very well…"

I draw my wooden sword and assume a middle stance. I track His Brothership and His Fathership by their presences and prepare to attack. It'd be dangerous to knock them off their horses in full armor, so I need to be careful.

But, seriously, is this how the heads of one of the Four Great Houses should behave? I have to admit, I'm a bit worried about this kingdom's future.

"Blois, they might attack Lady Douve, so if you could watch out for that."

"Yes, leave that to me."

“Good luck, Papa!”

With my wooden sword in hand, I activate my Flash Step.

My step takes me to His Lordship just as he enters range, and I balance on his mount’s head using Feather Step.

Obviously, a galloping horse’s head isn’t a stable platform, but it’s simple enough for an Immortal with Feather Step to remain upright in nearly any condition.

“DIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIEEE!”

Noticing my presence, His Brothership attacks me with his lance. Stepping onto the lance-tip with my Feather Step, I hit his helmet with a low-ish strike.

It’s a bit late to mention this, but if I use a Ki-Infused blow, I can still avoid killing my target. In addition to strengthening my blow, it also allows me to just knock them out. As His Brothership drops his lance, I calm his mount and gently rest his weight against the horse’s neck.

“HOW DARE YOU SULLY MY DAUGHTER!”

His Fathership notices me and charges. He led the house when I was hired, but he later abdicated his title to his son and is now living in retirement.

I just incapacitated the current lord, his son, but it seems that’s not a problem for him.

The moment His Fathership’s attention is drawn to my presence on His Brothership’s horse, I trigger a Flash Step and land on his mount’s head.

His Fathership falls victim to my helmet breaker, knocked out before he even realizes I’d moved.

“M-Master Sansui…”

Seeing me stop the pair, I feel fear and respect directed at me. The cavalry seems relieved as their masters are stopped.

“My apologies.”

“No, no, *we* owe *you* an apology.”

One of His Brothership’s aides directs the cavalry to stop while he approaches His Lordship’s horse to support his master. He looks at me apologetically. Well, sure, even if Lady Douve was the cause, that they couldn’t stop this absurdity is kind of on them.

I mean, I suppose they think it’s not really their fault, since they couldn’t have stopped them even if they had tried.

“We should have calmed them, but…”

“Not at all. It’s our fault for not being able to restrain Lady Douve…”

Was it a mistake to serve this House? Despite wondering this, the fact that I don’t quit immediately is probably a good sign that they’ve got us properly domesticated. Still, animals that live in groups have no choice but to obey, so long as they don’t have the guts to overthrow their leaders.

“We will take their lordships and head toward Lady Douve’s estate. Slowly.”

“Yes, thank you.”

His Fathership, now that I've knocked him out, is being supported by the knights around him. After confirming that their lordships are in good hands, I do a Flash Step back to the estate, where Lady Douve stands waiting.

Both my Master and I are specialists in individual combat. For obvious reasons, we don't have any interest in the morale of the military or the policies pursued by the fief lord. I don't have the knowledge to judge the abilities of the current lord, His Brothership, or the previous lord, His Fathership, as rulers or military commanders.

On the other hand, I do hold a high opinion of them as employers. At the very least, none of them including Lady Douve, has ever done anything like being late in paying my wages.

Despite that, I do feel that the father and brother can go too far at times. I know Lady Douve enjoys teasing them about it, but still, things certainly can't continue this way.

"You passed the test. Our House has many enemies. We could not entrust my sister to bodyguards who couldn't handle a sudden attack by an unexpected army."

"Impressive, just as I'd expect of my daughter's chosen bodyguard. Responding to our sudden test so well... We were worried you might be resting on your laurels after being hailed as a master swordsman, but it seems our concern was unfounded."

It seems His Brothership and His Fathership have decided that's the story and they're sticking to it. The two of them have stripped off their armor and are now sitting across the table from Lady Douve, sipping tea.

The pair look faintly embarrassed, but I wish they'd be a bit more ashamed of their actions. I mean, at least the knights waiting out front look appropriately abashed.

"Yes, Sansui still spends his free time swinging his sword."

"I'm glad to hear that... That dedication is to be expected of one so committed to our martial tradition."

I'm pretty sure charging at your younger sister's estate with cavalry goes beyond martial tradition and well into stupidity, which makes me wonder if these people can actually govern properly. I know practically nothing about the subject, but I'm still very concerned.

"That aside... Ahem, daughter of mine... Just what were you thinking with this proposal?"

"Yes, becoming Sansui's wife, if only in name, and making Blois have a child as your surrogate..."

I mean, sure, there's an issue with Lady Douve coming up with that sort of idea and sending it to His Fathership and His Brothership, but there's a much bigger problem with dragging out the knights in response. Surely that'd leave the residents of the capital unnerved, wouldn't it?

I mean, having the current and former lords of one of the Great Houses go charging off with their private army has got to be frightening to *someone*.

"Oh? It was a conclusion I drew while trying to respect the desire of Father and Brother to leave me to wither untouched on the vine."

"Well, yes, but…"

"Still…"

Come on, at least try to deny it. Why are you so obsessed with so completely restraining your own daughter? I'm starting to feel a little worried for Lady Douve. It might just be that she's actually a very unfortunate person, and she's just oblivious of it.

"There's the matter of your honor. Yes, Sansui's abilities are impressive, and his reputation now knows no bounds. That part is worthy of House Sepaeda. However…"

My power is not my own, but that of House Sepaeda. That's the accepted view in high society, and it's also the accepted view in this kingdom. However, that's one issue, and this is another one entirely. There's such a thing as asking for too much. Don't throw everyone around you for a loop on a whim.

…Eh? Someone just entered my detection range. That's one hell of a presence.

"Still, was what you mentioned in your letter true? I've never heard of anyone being able to use all of the Arts."

"Yes, Blois and I saw it with our own eyes. At the very least, he can use both the Mystic Arts and magic. Even then, Sansui completely outmatched her fiancé."

"I see… However, that can be a problem in and of itself. He's the favorite of a foreign princess. You should take some care in handling him. No doubt that's part of the reason why there's no real outcry about Saiga marrying into House Batterabbe."

"Well, we're talking about royalty from a barbarian kingdom…"

"If it was some random savage, I wouldn't say anything. But given that they declare themselves members of a royal house and wield a Rare Art, we can't simply dismiss them as irrelevant."

"Indeed. They may as well not exist if we have no relationship with them, but should they become an enemy, we will have to fight them eventually, no matter how far away they are. At the very least, it's best to avoid creating vendettas where they don't already exist."

…This jumbled presence, that must be Saiga. But, in addition to him, there's another presence I can't quite put my finger on.

Saiga, his harem, and a powerful presence. There are also two more auras I don't recognize.

The group, seven in total, are making their way here. Their attention is fixed on the estate, so there's no doubt about their destination. I feel the

presence of a horse, so one might be the carriage driver, but still, what's going on?

"Regardless, even if it's only in name, we can't have you marrying Sansui."

"I agree. This isn't a judgment as your brother, of course, but as the current lord of House Sepaeda."

"Oh, really now. Then who, pray tell, am I to marry? I'm starting to worry." Lady Douve notes, letting out a bit of what she actually feels. I understand. Marriageable age is a thing, after all.

Putting that aside, I should inform them of the approaching presences. I don't know if it's right to call this whole affair fortuitous, but with the House Sepaeda forces here, things shouldn't get too badly out of hand.

"Lady Douve, the House Batterabbe fiancé you were just discussing is coming this way with a small party. I suspect Lady Happine is among them."

"What? Again? It's a bit early for him to come asking for a rematch, isn't it?"

"Hold a moment. Which direction are they coming from?"

"From the capital, my lord."

"You mentioned a party. How many?"

"They appear to be moving by carriage. There are seven of them, including the driver. However, at least one of them is... Well, it's odd."

"Odd? Explain."

"People have a specific type of energy within them. Even Saiga, the Batterabbe fiancé, has several types of energy within him. However... This presence has no color. It feels like it could become whatever it wishes to be."

"A presence that feels non-human, then..."

"Still, I doubt they are here to attack us."

As His Brothership gathers information from me, His Fathership moves to calm him.

Comparatively speaking, it's less of a problem than the pair who had been looking to attack us with a cavalry unit in tow. They still seem eager for a fight, though.

"It's only an outside possibility... The current lord, the one who's taken a shine to this Saiga, might be with them."

"Father, surely..."

"Word is going around that he might even abdicate his title to that child. It's certainly not impossible. In any case, no doubt the news of our departure must have made a stir in the capital, so they likely know we're here as well."

I wish he'd displayed this calm reasoning ability before dragging his cavalry out this far.

"Regardless, we have something to say before you prepare to welcome them. Indeed, Blois, that was our original reason for coming here."

“Yes, thank you for bringing it up, Father. Blois, we’ve long put the burden of protecting my sister on your shoulders. If you are fond of this man, you will have no objections from us. We will bestow a suitable title on you, and you two can marry. We’re more than ready to provide you with a title worthy of your service.”

Both His Brothership and His Fathership are both saying what Blois wants to hear, but they’re also totally ignoring my wishes, entirely on purpose. They’re also clearly pretending not to notice Lady Douve’s expression of protest. Blois looks happy, but she doesn’t seem aware of Lady Douve’s reaction, or of mine. Is it really necessary for someone to become unhappy for someone to obtain happiness?

“It’s been a while. I believe this is the first I’ve seen of you in your dotage?”

One of the unknown auras does, in fact, belong to the head of House Batterabbe.

Being Happine’s father, he’s around the same age as Lady Douve’s father, but he’s still the active head of his House.

“Perhaps. The days do blend together once you have nothing to do. It almost feels as though I saw you as recently as yesterday.”

“How I envy you. I’m eager to retire and hand off the reins to my son-in-law. Perhaps I’ll take the time to dote on my grandchildren.”

“Oh, Father!”

Lady Happine seems very pleased by the remark. The future son-in-law in question, Saiga, looks a little embarrassed.

Still, you have to wonder. Is it really okay to hand off one of the Four Great Houses to some random man off the street? And what about Saiga himself? I certainly wouldn’t want that job.

“And it seems… You will be keeping quiet on the abilities of my future son-in-law, won’t you?”

“I only learned of it recently, myself. So long as it’s a secret that benefits the kingdom, we’ll happily shoulder that burden.”

His Fathership, the previous lord, is doing all of the speaking, while His Brothership, the current lord, remains quiet.

Given the difference in their ages and that we’re not in public, I suppose he’s content to let his father handle the pleasantries.

“If you consider it a debt, then go ahead and feel indebted. No need to repay it just now. Yet… I have to question your judgment, ever so slightly.”

“Mm.”

It seems that the head of House Batterabbe understands what he wants to say, and shows no sign of surprise.

“I’ll put aside this business about a foreign princess, but welcoming a hex caster into your family isn’t the act of a sane man. Publicly associating yourself with a hex caster is a serious mistake. You know it’ll bring

misfortune to both of you. Were you so besotted that you need reminding of that simple fact?”

“Take that back!”

As I feared, Saiga responds with anger. Sure, that’s to be expected. He loves all of his harem equally. Having one of the people he loves be criticized for something they can’t particularly help is obviously going to set him off.

However, it looks like His Fathership said it with at least some intention of eliciting that reaction. He wasn’t going to say anything unnecessary, but he seems intent on testing Saiga. It’s kind of impressive how easily Saiga walked into that trap. While it’s his life, and not my place to judge, I’m a little concerned about his future.

“Zuger is precious to me! I can’t let you speak ill of her!”

“And? What will yelling at me accomplish? It won’t change how others view her.”

“How does that justify saying whatever you wish?!”

Walked right into that one, too. That’s hardly a tone to address the former head of one of the Four Great Houses. Of course, it’s a bit rich coming from a man who had been engaging in some extremely compromising behavior just a few minutes ago. It’s much more embarrassing to get so flustered over your daughter wanting to enter a sham marriage that you launch an armed invasion of her estate.

“Ah, so, you’ve got spirit. But what do you plan to do with that spirit? Fight me, perhaps? Should the former head of a Great House and the future head of a Great House clash with their armies?”

“W-Why would it come to that?!”

“If I were ten years younger, I would have considered a duel, but I’m not of an age where I can fight you myself.”

Okay, that’s a lie. You were literally just trying to fight a few minutes ago. You had a lance in hand and everything.

“Do you intend to satisfy your honor by beating up on an old man? Have me engage in a battle where I’m assured a loss?”

“No, I…”

“In which case, we must fight with our House forces. It might result in some casualties among our men, and their families will certainly grieve, but I have my honor to preserve.”

I’m pretty sure His Fathership and His Brothership don’t have much left in the way of honor to besmirch. They already ran it into the ground the moment they went wild-eyed and led a cavalry charge against their own daughter’s estate. Not to mention they did it with an entire army in tow, so their subordinates all know about it.

“To go to such lengths, merely to save face…”

“You’re the one who spoke up in defense of your lover’s honor. So, what will it be? It’s fine to be spirited, but how do you plan to resolve this?”

“…I’ll apologize for my outburst. So, please, apologize to Zuger.”

“I refuse. It’s pointless.”

“Pointless?!”

As His Fathership noted earlier, it’s completely pointless just to have one or two people come around on an issue. The important thing here is the view of society itself.

“Hexes are not suitable for use in combat, but they are the most useful Art for assassination. The target can die of disease, leaving no evidence of foul play. On the other side of the coin, each time misfortune visits House Batterabbe, she’ll find herself under scrutiny.”

“Zuger wouldn’t do such a thing, and I wouldn’t ask that of her!”

“And how will you convince society at large? Do you plan to go around and persuade each person, one by one?”

“I…”

“And you won’t be the one to suffer. All the harm will fall on that hex caster.”

The question here isn’t whether or not you *will* do it, but whether or not you *can* do it. Historically, there were periods of conflict that featured hex-based assassinations. No wonder most people are afraid of hex rituals.

“Not that I expect youth to do anything but rebel against such warnings, of course. So, why are you here? Surely you didn’t come all this way to have this youngster yell at me.”

“As for that… Well.”

The head of House Batterabbe moved to introduce a new face. It doesn’t seem to be a case of ‘what the hell is he thinking, adding more members to his harem.’ She doesn’t look much older than Lain, but she’s the unnatural presence I noticed earlier.

“My son-in-law managed to draw the Sacred Sword.”

“Indeed? Then that girl is…”

“Correct. I am the Sacred Sword Eckesachs. The ultimate sword, crafted by the Gods!”

Say what? News to me.

“I have accepted this man, Mizu Saiga, as my wielder, and have returned to the mortal world after a thousand-year silence.”

“A sentient blade taking the form of a human… No wonder it has a different aura than a human.”

Oh, so, well, I guess that explains why they left the academy.

“That’s right… Which is why, Sansui, I want to ask for a rematch!”

Wait, how does that logic work? Even if that girl is the ultimate sword, how does that get around to fighting me again? There’s no reason on my end to fight him. A glance at Lady Douve reveals she finds the whole thing as bothersome as I do. If not for the presence of Happine’s father, no doubt she would have simply said no.

“Listen to me, Happine…”

“What? Are you afraid now? Of my Saiga, now that he has the ultimate sword?”

“No, that’s not it… In all honesty, I don’t care about you lot anymore. I have new interests to deal with… This is all just such a bother…”

Yeah, that’s right, we have our own concerns. It’s not like we’re living our lives for their benefit.

They might have gone on a great adventure to obtain this wonderful sword, but that doesn’t stir anything in us at all. Besides, in either case, we’re probably going to fight where no one else can see anything, again.

“What sort of logic is that?! You said he could have a rematch if we had a good reason to think he could win!”

“Well yes… But, I mean, he’s not going to beat Sansui anyway…”

“You can’t say that without letting him try!”

“Considering he didn’t put up much of a fight the first two times?”

Yeah, I mean, if there was noticeable progress or developments between the first two fights, there might have been something to look forward to, but both duels were just so anticlimactic. There really aren’t any high expectations left.

If it were to end in a single blow after all this build up… Well, talk about disappointment.

“Well, Sansui? Is he stronger?”

“In that respect…”

He doesn’t look any stronger to me. If anything, he seems weaker.

“…I believe the results will be the same.”

“So that’s that. Go on home.”

“I’m not the same man as last time! I trained hard to get Eckesachs to accept me! I feel like I can do more than hold my own! I can win!”

What is with his confidence? I wish he’d just give up already.

“You feel you can win… Right, and if you did win, what then? It’s not your skill that won, it’s because your sword is powerful. Would knowing that really satisfy you?”

“How dare you, you brat!”

The sword that’s existed for at least a thousand years, and is therefore my senior, starts yelling at me. She’s pale with fury. I suppose saying, ‘it’s not Saiga’s power, it’s the sword,’ does fundamentally deny her reason for existing.

Still, even if he wins, he’ll start blaming his sword for the fact that he lost the first two times. I mean, he lost twice. Does he really think he can win this time just with a little training and getting a new, better weapon?

“You dare mock my chosen greatest duelist?”

“Greatest duelist…?”

“Know that mocking my chosen swordsman is equal to mocking me!”

“That’s right. I might be weak… Yet now that she’s chosen me, I have no choice but to surpass you, Sansui, and become the greatest duelist in the world!”

I mean, even if he beats me, there’s still my much stronger Master to contend with. I wonder how he’d react if I explained that to him.

“Sansui, go ahead and face him. Either way, they won’t be able to back down after all this. However, this will be the final duel. If you can’t accept that, today isn’t the time to try.”

His Fathership offers a compromise. It’s a sign of permission, really.

I mean, yes, this feels like it would go on forever, otherwise. And they certainly can’t back down after going through the trouble of retrieving a legendary sword and having it dismissed as irrelevant.

“And the fact of the matter is, I’m interested in this battle. To see how my ultimate duelist deals with the swordsman chosen by the Ultimate Sword.”

He may be old, but he’s still from a martial tradition. His eyes shine like those of a much younger man. It might be the third duel for Lady Douve, but both their lordships are going to be seeing this for the first time. I can understand having some expectations.

“Very well, I’ll attend as a witness as well. Is that acceptable, Happine, Saiga?”

“Yes, Father!”

“Our final duel… I’ll win, whatever it takes!”

“That goes without saying. You cannot lose to someone who dismisses the value of the sword!”

Which of us is actually dismissing the value of the sword? I think it’s time to drive that point home.

Part 7 — Sacred Sword

Happine, Sunae, Zuger, and I are all heading to the capital in the same carriage. Since we're traveling from the Academy, and both places are in the Royal Lands, it's not much of a journey.

"I'm sorry, everyone. Just as we'd gotten to the Academy..."

"No worries. I don't think I could have just let that go."

"Right. I would have been too frustrated to focus on my studies."

"..."

While Happine, Sunae, and I haven't been able to put the losses behind us, Zuger remains quiet in her seat.

She just couldn't bring herself to support me fighting him again.

I can't blame her. He's definitely way too skilled.

The kingdom's greatest master swordsman, Sansui Shirokuro... I need to accept it. There's no way I can beat him right now.

But I can't just leave it at that.

"I've studied mysticism, magic, spirit possession, hexes, and divination. Even pitting all of those abilities against him, I still stood no chance against him... That would mean everything I've done since coming to this world has been a mistake. The fact I'm weaker than him means... It means my relationships are inferior to his."

This might be the first time I've felt this way since coming to this world. Feeling that need to win.

But if things stay the way they are, I won't win. No, if anything, I'll just end up getting beaten in a single blow, no matter how many times I challenge him.

"I need to find a new source of strength..."

"I'm sure Father can put us on the right path."

I haven't been in this world for long. I can use magic and Rare Arts, but that's it. It's not like I know everything there is to know.

That's why I've decided to speak to Happine's father, the current lord of House Batterabbe, who has the wisdom born of years of experience.

"If only we were closer to my kingdom... It's so frustrating."

"Oh, I thought you just wanted a strong groom. Why not just marry him?"

"That's not acceptable. Being considered such a flighty, unfaithful woman would be unbearable. And you? Saiga lost to a mere bodyguard of your rival house, Sepaeda. Shouldn't you call off the engagement?"

"No, Saiga's the one I want!"

Despite the fact that I was humiliated in two duels, they refuse to abandon me. I have to admit that knowing that makes me very happy. A part of me was worried they'd leave me if I lost.

"Anyway, no doubt Father can give us the advice we need!"

Looking at the approaching great walls of the capital, I felt hope that I would find new power there.

“Welcome, my son-in-law. As well as Your Highness, Princess Sunae. Miss Zuger.”

Catching him between tasks, we were able to get an immediate audience with Happine’s father.

Zuger’s rather frightened of him, but he’s an admirable man, and he wouldn’t abuse his authority to salve his pride. He’s even been kind enough to accept me, a random outsider, as his daughter’s fiancé.

“So... You crossed swords with the Sepaeda swordmaster?”

My father-in-law was kind enough to comfort us, recognizing from our glum expressions that I had probably lost. And while it hurts my pride a bit, he didn’t seem at all surprised that I’d lost.

“Yes, I couldn’t do anything against him. I first fought him with just my Mystic Arts and my divination, but then I faced him a second time with all of my abilities other than my hexes…”

“It was my fault, Father. I was so angry about losing to Douve that I let slip Saiga’s secret...”

“And yet you lost...”

He sighs. While it’s clear he’s come to terms with it, he still seems a bit deflated.

I guess he still held some hope I could win, and he’s disappointed to have that hope dashed.

“...He is the greatest duelist in these lands. If you used all of your abilities and still couldn’t defeat him, that shows he truly is the greatest.”

I have a decent grasp of what had happened. Looking at it objectively, I’m the one who cheated a bit, since all he did was respond with his swordsmanship. The only word that describes that is mastery.

“If I recall, you had no swordsmanship training before this, yes?”

“Yes, I’d never picked up a sword before coming here.”

I never learned anything like kendo in my time in Japan. I picked up my sword skills after coming to this world.

Still, with my enhanced physical abilities and improved reflexes, I mastered the art of the blade pretty quickly. Though, even with that, I didn’t stand a chance. No doubt Sansui had studied kendo or kenjutsu before coming to this world.

“There are several stages to mastery of the sword. For most opponents, a large, strong swordsman yelling loudly while taking a powerful swing is enough to defeat them. Do you know why?”

“Because it’s a powerful blow?”

“No, because it frightens the opponent.”

Father, who is the current head of House Batterabbe, a martial house like House Sepaeda, quietly begins to explain the logic of the sword.

“Frightening your opponent, intimidating them, is extremely effective, whether in single combat or in mass battles. You may have experienced it against him yourself, but even a slight dulling of your reflexes is enough to cost you the battle. That’s because, even if the opponent is relatively well-armed, so long as you have a high-quality weapon, you can just keep attacking them until they yield. This is always true, whether with blade alone, or when using magic with your swordplay.”

The logic is simple and sound. Gain size and strength to be able to overwhelm your opponent. That’s part of the rationale behind Spirit Possession. Of course, you actually gain more power than your appearance suggests, so it’s not like that’s all bark and no bite, but still.

“However, when it comes to talented swordsmen, things begin to change. Technique enters the equation.”

That’s right. I’ve learned a number of magic sword techniques, and those had let me beat all manner of opponents, but they didn’t work on him.

“And then there’s him. Frankly, I don’t understand how he can be that powerful. He may very well be beyond understanding. His skill with the sword is simply on another plane entirely.”

Yes, that’s true. His ability to teleport may as well be a bonus. Sansui’s skill with a blade is on the level of legendary masters and mythical swordsmen. That’s the only way he could possibly have dealt with my precognition.

“It’s as though he can read your mind, hitting where you don’t expect, or countering right when you try to attack him. When I heard your description of divination, I thought he might be using a similar Art, but that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

Divination isn’t infallible. That’s something I learned from fighting him.

“Which means his strength comes from his skill. And knowing that, you still wish to defeat him?”

“Yes, sir!”

“I see… That’s a good expression on you. In all honesty, there were times I was worried about you. You seemed to lack drive. I feared you would let your talent go to waste. The drive to become stronger. That’s something that you needed.”

He smiles serenely, handing me a map.

“I doubt there will ever be another to match his skill. That would be true no matter how much time he spends instructing others. In effect, his abilities are not a threat when viewed at the level of kingdoms, and he himself is a retainer to this kingdom’s own House Sepaeda. There is no real reason that you *must* be able to defeat him, but that drive to match him is important. I would like to believe that my son-in-law is stronger than the bodyguard of Sepaeda’s Diva Princess.”

“Father, what is this map?”

“This map shows the location of a Sacred Sword, one said to slumber deep within a cavern. A sentient sword sealed there by the greatest

swordsman in an age that far predated the founding of this kingdom. The sword is said to strengthen its master's abilities, giving them unmatched power."

I could feel my body trembling. I never imagined such a sword existed. With that sword, I might be able to beat Sansui.

"Legend has it the sword has a volatile personality and it will reject most seekers out of hand. But perhaps you might be able to..."

"I'm sure Saiga is up to it!"

"Yes... I honestly thought we would be stuck below House Sepaeda, but I entrust my hopes for House Batterabbe to you. I pray the sword accepts you, and that you're able to secure a rematch...and victory."

"Yes, you can count on me!"

I accept the map and his hopes.

And with it, I gain another reason I can't lose. With my heart beating with hope, I can't contain my excitement.

The ultimate sword, Eckesachs. The object of my desires lay in a deep in a cavern, thrust into the stone, hilt and all. All of us felt the sword's potential, even as it lay trapped in the stone. The presence the sword exudes is just that powerful.

"Oh? Visitors? It has been a long time," said the sword.

"My previous wielder sealed me here after finding my power too much to handle. Since then, all I have been able to do is speak and avoid being drawn by the unworthy. Are you a swordsman worthy of wielding me? Prove it to me."

Despite the arrogant tone, I understood immediately that she was extremely lonely, and so I began training hard in front of her. Her condition for accepting me as her wielder was to split a boulder using a sword, without relying on magic. She declared that if I could manage that, she would accept that I had the talent necessary to be worthy of her power.

My physical abilities were boosted when I came to this world, so I had been able to do most tasks without any difficulty, but even for me, splitting a boulder with a normal sword took an enormous amount of effort.

During my training, she began telling me more about her past.

How there was a man who had abandoned her. That she can't forget his words. And that she could not ever accept his statement.

"If you are to become my Master, my wielder... Overcome him, he who denied my purpose."

"Alright, win or lose, this is our last fight. You'll have to let me claim this one."

"Still, you seem to have used that wooden sword quite a bit. Are you sure you don't need a new weapon?"

"Yes. This will do."

As always, he's dressed in plain clothes and holding his wooden sword.

He’s facing me in that getup while I square off against him with Eckesachs.

It’d be easy to take this as an insult. But I’ve already lost twice, so I understand the need to be careful. My opponent is absurdly strong. I’ll fight with that understanding.

“Such an enormously intimidating presence coming from a sword. I see that the title of Ultimate Sword is well-earned.”

“Yes. Combined with my son’s abilities, it is indeed worthy of being called the most powerful.”

The sword I’m holding in my hands is a beautiful weapon, intricately decorated with divine craftsmanship. The aura emanating from Eckesachs felt like it was enough to split mountains or oceans on its own.

Both the retired lord of House Sepaeda and my father-in-law seem to recognize this and are extremely tense.

“Don’t worry Saiga, you’ve got this. Remember all the effort you put in!”

I broke sword after sword trying to split that boulder. We had to go back and buy a replacement each time. Happine volunteered to take each trip without so much as a word of complaint.

“Believe in your training! Give it all that you have!”

In spite of her lack of sword training, Sunae taught me how to control my center of gravity. It was her advice that made it possible for me to cut that rock.

“Please… Please be careful…”

Despite using my Mystic Arts to heal my hands, my lack of skill meant that they were still covered with nagging injuries. Knowing that she couldn’t heal them, but still wishing she could, Zuger grasped my hands, praying for the pain to recede.

“You, my chosen wielder, will make use of my power. There is nothing we cannot cleave! There is nothing to fear!”

Eckesachs lost her trust in humans after a millennium of solitude. She’s chosen to trust again, placing her faith in me.

I have to win. For all of them!

“Well then, I will signal for your start. Are you two ready?”

“My Lord, please wait a moment.”

Douve’s older brother, the current lord of House Sepaeda, is about to issue the signal to start.

Yet, for some reason, Sansui puts a stop to it, looking over in a random direction.

“Ahem. Lady Regent, please show yourself.”

At Sansui’s prompting, the Regent of the Arcana Academy stepped out from the shadows in the Sepaeda-owned woods. Sheesh, she’s pretty spry, given how old she is.

“Oh my, I’m so sorry. I just couldn’t keep my curiosity in check.”

“Your orders, Lady Douve?”

“Mm. It’s perfectly within our rights to just kill her.” Douve casually drops a scary hint to intimidate the Regent.

I mean, it’s a problem that she’s seen this, but killing her seems a little much.

“Oh dear… Perhaps this is the end for little old me?”

“But, as your lecture was rather enjoyable… We’ll let you live, if you consent to being blindfolded.”

“How cruel… To deny my curiosity, the only thing I have to look forward to in my old age…”

“I don’t mind.”

I heard myself saying it without consciously deciding to. It wasn’t good for the Regent to learn of my power, but that was also true of Douve learning about it, too.

I might have also wanted to let as many people as possible see my strength.

“This is not your call to make, but… Certainly, that would only besmirch this meeting. It’s a proper duel, so any commentary is forbidden, but I will allow you to observe.”

“Thank you, milord.”

The Regent smiles happily and wanders over to join the House Sepaeda observers.

We were finally ready.

“Then once again… Both sides are ready?” asks the lord of House Sepaeda, one last time.

“Whenever you wish.”

“I’m ready as well!”

There was no way Sansui or I would have any objections.

“…Then, begin!”

Eckesachs has greatly strengthened my precognition. My precognition tells me that, like last time, Sansui will wait in a middle stance until I’m finished buffing myself. In the past I would have taken that as an insult, but this time, I’ll happily take the time to prepare. That’s because my biggest concern is getting taken down before I can use my magic.

“Grand Pride Armor!”

This is armor of light, created with the Mystic Arts. It provides substantially greater defenses than if I were to wear actual physical armor.

“Maximum Burning Spirit!”

Eckesachs erupts into flame, further reinforcing her power.

“Fenrir, the Doom Wolf that Devours even the Gods. Answer my call and consume my enemies!”

With my improved Spirit Possession, my physical abilities and reflexes are massively augmented.

“Witness… This is my… No, *our* power!”

The flame magic from Happine. The combat Mystic Arts from Father. The secret royal art of Spirit Possession from Sunae. By accepting me as

her wielder, Eckesachs reinforces all of them. And… Zuger is part of me, too.

I feel I can't lose. Whether it's because Eckesachs has strengthened my precognition, or whether it's simply a feature of Eckesachs herself, I have a vague feeling that I understand the power behind Sansui's wooden sword.

"Well, that's surprising… My Ki Infusion won't cut through it."

One of the reasons I lost to Sansui was the fact that my Mystic Arts defenses were inferior to Sansui's Immortal Arts attack. Sansui was able to penetrate my defenses with both the palm to the face and the thrust through my armor. If I reinforce my Mystic Arts armor enough, I should be able to stop those attacks.

"Yes… Eckesachs has strengthened my magic! Even if you empower your wooden sword, my armor and helmet won't let your attacks through!"

Until now, I've lost because I had no response to Sansui's attacks, even when I knew they were coming.

But this time is different. Even if he knows my defenses, he can't do anything about them.

"That can't be… Sansui!"

"Sansui… Are you sure you can handle this?"

And yet, Sansui seems unflappable, remaining as calm as ever, despite recognizing that he can't get through my defenses. Even then, Douve and her other bodyguard seem concerned.

That's right. It's not like he's a bad guy, nor is it that I have some reason to defeat him. But I still want to beat him.

Really, there was no need for me to learn new magic once I'd picked up the Mystic Arts. It might have been better if I had focused on my healing magic and worked to support everyone else. That might have been enough to find my place in this world. I could have lived my life without any major inconveniences, if that was the case.

In the end, I think I just wanted to get stronger. Even with the world's greatest sword in my hand, I knew I wouldn't be satisfied until I beat the man in front of me.

"I'm going to hit you with everything that I have!"

Even if, hypothetically, he comes at me with a move I've never seen before, with my Spirit Possession, I can handle whatever the armor doesn't stop. Injuries that I sustain can be healed with the Mystic Arts.

I don't care if it's embarrassing or ugly. I'll beat Sansui if it means I need to gnaw him to death.

"I see…well, if Ki Infusion won't work…"

I'm puzzled by what I see through my precognition. The fact that Sansui is actually moving in accordance with my precognition throws me further off-guard.

"The hell are you thinking?!"

"Well, if Ki Infusion won't work, there's no reason to use my wooden sword. And I would rather not break it, so…"

He places the wooden sword back into his sash. It doesn't appear he's given up on the battle, and instead he closes the distance between us. I'm not the only one who's surprised. Everyone else is also shocked that he's put his sword away.

"You used your magic, I put my sword away. That's all it is. Let's continue our duel."

Unarmed, the master swordsman approaches slowly. There's not a trace of fear or hesitation in his expression.

I don't have a good grasp on his intentions, but I'm certain of a few things. One is not to underestimate Sansui, even when unarmed.

"Why hesitate? Strike now, with all your might!" Eckesachs nudges me onward. I notice my movements are tense, and ease up on my grip.

"Yeah, I got it!"

The right way to swing a sword. The right way to shift your weight. By combining these techniques, I'm now capable of hewing a boulder in half with a steel sword.

In which case, with the divine blade Eckesachs in my hand, strengthened by my empowered magic, I can execute a single blow that can overwhelm the power of even a Ki Infusion.

"Prepare yourself...! Burning Explosive Stone Crushing Wolf Fang Slash...?!"

I prepare to throw the culmination of everything I've learned in this world at Sansui...when a vision crosses my mind.

Everything has flipped upside down, and I'm falling into the air.

Even as I realized that was the future that was coming, I couldn't think of a single response to that outcome!

"I suppose it was...a good slash."

By the time I heard that voice, my body feels excessively light.

The moment I tried to unleash and complete my swing, my positioning goes completely off the rails.

I float off the surface, and I stare blankly at the clouds faintly obscured by the wood's trees.

Despite facing forward, I'm staring up at the sky. I can't grasp what it is that's happening, watching as events unfold as they do in my precognition...

"I should have at least followed through on my swing."

With the return of my weight, I fall backward onto the ground.

The spells I'm using suddenly lose their power, and my hand, which had held Eckesachs a moment earlier, is empty.

"It's over."

Rather than my hand, I find Eckesachs pointed at my armored throat.

I'd fought Sansui three times. The first time, he knocked me out with a palm strike. The second time, I took a counterattack and suffered in agony. As for the third time...

"Ah, you threw me, then took my blade..."

"That's right."

He’d laid me out on the ground without me feeling so much as a twinge of pain...

Part 8 — Swordsmanship

I won. It was a hollow victory.

I get it. You keep acquiring new power-ups. Frankly, I don't need you telling me about it each time.

I imagine this must be what it's like to face off against an RPG protagonist who's always accumulating new skills.

Right now, I'm tempted to just report him to the authorities as a stalker.

"I lost…"

I hand the sword back to Saiga, still lying on the ground. After that, I head back over to Lady Douve. This is no different from usual, but the members of House Sepaeda and House Batterabbe have gone quiet at the underwhelming and sudden end. It's to be expected. I feel the same way.

"I lost…"

Despite the fact that I didn't so much as scratch him, Saiga remains on the ground, staring mutely into space. No one had any words of comfort to offer him. It was a dull outcome, as usual, but it went about as it should have. It's possible that most of them aren't even sure what happened.

"Yes, my wielder, Saiga…"

Having witnessed everything and ended up pressing her point against her master's throat, a similarly shocked Eckesachs returns to human form. Once again looking like a young girl, tears of frustration spill down her cheeks.

"We've lost…"

Sound judgment, as expected of a Sacred Sword. There's nothing to do but to admit defeat after an encounter like that.

However, it's true that it *was* a humiliating defeat. What's hard to accept is hard to accept. If anything, it might have been easier to accept being cut down.

"Sansui, what did you do?" Lady Douve asks for an explanation even as she processes her own surprise. It's not as though I did anything particularly special. I simply made use of abilities Lady Douve has seen countless times before.

"I lightened him with my Feather Step, and then I took his sword as I threw him to the ground."

This explanation comes a bit later than it ought to, but Feather Step's effects aren't limited to my own body. If that were the case, my lightened body would be weighed down by my wooden sword, disrupting my center of gravity and making me look to all the world like an object of ridicule. In fact, that's how it was when I was still learning.

"Immortal Arts can be used to make things other than yourself lighter?!"

"Yes, that's right."

The Regent, who had been listening to my explanation, had recently told us about some failed experiments. About the failures of trying to emulate

the Mystic Arts with magic. That, and the fact that it wasn't realistic to drop a magically created boulder from a high altitude.

However, that only applies in the case of magic. It would be one thing when dealing with a giant tree that's deeply rooted into the ground, but things that are just standing on the surface will easily float with the use of Immortal Arts techniques.

That is, the Immortal Arts allows the sort of high-altitude boulder-dropping attacks that magic isn't capable of doing, and an application of that technique can be used to throw an opponent to the ground.

"To be honest, I wanted to see what a Burning Explosive Stone Crushing Wolf Fang Slash looks like… However, a duel is a duel. This is the last time."

In the end his precognition just kept getting in his way. It was true the first time, as well. Visions of situations you can't cope with or can't understand do nothing but make you tense up and leave you vulnerable. Saiga has yet to overcome that problem.

Given the situation and my explanation, both the lord of House Batterabbe and Lady Happine are at a loss for words. Looking at it from the vantage point of sheer number of abilities, it didn't look like I could possibly win, so they must have been sure of Saiga's victory.

However dull it might have been, I won in a fairly straightforward manner.

"Lord Saiga~~!"

Zuger was the first to move. She, a hex caster, clung to Saiga as his magic faded, her tears attesting to her joy at seeing him unhurt. That's right, he wasn't hurt at all. That's a very good thing. In that regard, he hasn't lost a thing.

"I'm so glad… So glad you're safe…"

"Zuger… I'm sorry… I… I… I… I… I lost…"

He couldn't hold back his disappointment. Tears brimming, Saiga began to weep.

"Why…why can't we win?!"

"Sansui threw him because he thought the wooden sword wouldn't work. It was surprising, but that's all it is."

"That's not what I mean… But, but… Saiga tried so hard!"

Lady Douve's reaction is just completely according to form. That or she's entirely lost interest, given that the result was far more anticlimactic than even she could have ever imagined. But it appears Happine doesn't share that feeling.

Of course, having seen his efforts up close, it's an understandable reaction. With all that effort, I can see why you'd expect to win. But this is reality, and the results speak for themselves.

Herbivores, carnivores, and plants are all living things, and the exchange of those lives is simply a natural outcome rather than any kind of

moral judgment. In the same way, their efforts simply ended in a result where they still couldn't measure up to me.

But that's all it is. Zuger's reaction is the right one.

Or, so the old man in me wants to say. Of course, losing is hard to accept. It would be another thing entirely to take no joy in winning, though.

"How were you able to so easily take Eckesachs, anyway?!" Happine protests to me, but even there, it's not like I did anything special.

"It's true that Lord Saiga, your fiancé, had greatly increased his strength using Spirit Possession. It isn't a simple matter to take a sword from his grasp. However, his hand isn't fixed in place like a vise. Having his body lifted into the air, then falling to the ground back first while upside down… Well, it's hard to maintain a firm grip on a sword in circumstances like that."

Of course, it's possible he tenses and increases the strength of his grip. He might also react to the attempt to take the sword and tighten his grip. However, these things change from each moment to moment. Human beings can't just maintain the exact same stance and strength over an extended period of time. If you can take advantage of a momentary relaxation in grip, taking a sword from an armored opponent is simple.

"I seized on that moment and took the sword."

"*Sniff*... Why are you so strong?! Being able to use a Rare Art shouldn't make you that strong!"

"It's time to give it a rest." Sunae tries to calm Happine's anger. Despite her disappointment, Sunae seems to have made her peace with the outcome.

"Three challenges and three defeats. Saiga is the man I thought he was: a driven, passionate man. But there are some things that can't be changed."

"But he tried so hard! And we even helped him!"

"Enough! Stop your sniveling!" As Happine can't accept the outcome, Sunae follows up.

I'm sure she's frustrated, too, but since she understands the defeat, she's putting all her effort into convincing Happine to accept it.

"Both sides did their best! There was nothing to be ashamed of! The fact was simply that the opponent was stronger than Saiga! And yet you keep looking for excuses!"

"But... But... This is wrong! It's just wrong…"

As Lady Happine breaks down in laughter, Princess Sunae embraces her.

"You have my apologies…for my daughter's outburst." The lord of House Batterabbe apologizes to me.

At the same time, it seems he can't quite grasp the outcome. Like his daughter, he didn't seem to expect things to end so quickly.

"But, I'd like to know. How could you defeat Saiga…my son, so easily?"

"As for that…"

Do I have a right to say this out loud? It’s going to be a rather harsh assessment.

I glance toward their lordships. They still look surprised, but they nod in response to my silent request.

“In the simplest sense, it’s because he’s weak, and he’s weak because he lacks sufficient training.”

No doubt he trained, no doubt he put the effort in. No doubt he worked hard. He spared no effort into self-improvement for long enough to obtain certain results. He suffered and he struggled. As a result, he gained strength.

However, he lost in a duel. After that, there’s only one answer: he didn’t put in enough effort.

“I did put effort into it… I even learned how to cut a boulder in half with a steel sword.” Saiga says from Zuger’s approach, as though making an excuse. He can’t seem to avoid saying it, even as he understands that it’s childish.

“Was that not enough?”

“There’s no end to training. It lasts a lifetime. To feel you’ve reached the end of your training merely by being able to split a boulder is a sign of your immaturity.”

Unlike me, he’s probably as young as he looks. He hasn’t the benefit of training under an Immortal. I doubt he’s even been in this world for a full year. I won’t go so far as to say that’s not enough time to even call it effort, but even those days of work are only one step in the effort that’s demanded by the future.

It’s one thing if you were to simply give up on your training, but believing there is a place where you have reached ultimate skill is just proof of immaturity.

“In fact, Sai — Lord Saiga… You’re operating under a false premise.”

“About what…?”

“What do you consider me?”

“A powerful foe, the likes of which I’d never faced before.”

“…I’m exactly what I appear to be. A man in a kimono armed with a wooden sword.”

“No, you’re this kingdom’s greatest… The Baby-Faced Master Swordsman…”

“You mentioned training to slash a boulder in half. Do you actually need that much power to kill me?”

I honestly don’t get that part. I’ve never used any techniques that raise my defenses, nor have I ever boasted of having such a technique. I don’t understand why he felt the need to engulf his sword in flame or borrow the power of beasts.

The move I interrupted was so wasteful. Does he think I’m some sort of legendary dragon, a sealed Demon Lord, or a Dark God out to destroy the

world? He doesn't need to drag out some legendary sword to fight me. A steel sword is more than enough.

"You misunderstand. I don't know what it's like with magic, but with the way of the blade, the key is economy of motion. For example, when swinging a sword, if you tense your body's muscles, you end up slowing yourself down. As such, it's vital to know which muscles to use and which to leave relaxed."

This has nothing to do with magic, it's true even from the standpoint of modern kinesthesiology… At least I think it is. I'm pretty sure this is true not just of sword swings, but of things like running, too.

"It's true that you need strength to swing a sword. But that's only because swinging a sword requires a certain amount of strength. Not because the more muscle you have, the better your swing. This might not be true if we were both wearing armor."

"Then what was the point of my…"

"I think your training had purpose. However, no matter how proper your form or movements, no matter how well you can manage the execution, there's no point if you end your search, content with the results. That's merely the start of your path."

"The start…"

"At a minimum, there's no point if you can't do it with all of your sword swinging mechanics. All of your movements need to be perfectly optimized."

Executing a technique right when you want to do it… If that's all you can do, that's where your limitations are.

"This is only my opinion, but you were at your best at our first meeting. Every time after that, your movements have become stiffer. You're shouldering too much."

This may be a positive aspect of the all-powerful hero archetype. There's no tension in the desire to win every single battle. It allows responding to each situation as it unfolds. At the very least, Saiga was able to do that at our first match. But the moment he tasted defeat, his desire to win had the effect of dragging him down like an anchor. It may seem contradictory, but the harder you want to win, the more likely the tension robs you of your capacity to maximize your abilities.

"Our fights weren't actual battles, just duels. There was no point in you hardening your defenses. There shouldn't have been a need to use magic if all you had was a wooden sword. The folly of dragging a legendary sword into this goes without saying. I can't say much about Spirit Possession, and precognition should be allowed up to a certain point. Your mistake, Saiga, was that you tried to use everything at your disposal."

Since I'm unable to try it for myself, this is only a guess, but combining that much magic and Rare Arts into simultaneous use has to be such a burden. Which means he was using a whole bunch of techniques he didn't, and couldn't, use properly. It's like fighting with a Swiss Army knife with all of the tools out at once.

“It’s a valid choice when at war or fighting multiple opponents, but it’s much too wasteful to use on one-on-one duels. You should have focused on just what you needed to do, and nothing else.”

I’m sure the fact he can do just about anything is his strength, but phrasing it differently, it simply means he can do lots of different things at once. It provides a response to all manner of problems and gives him a lot of options in life. That in itself is wonderful. However, that’s entirely different from being the greatest duelist in the kingdom.

“You couldn’t defeat me. That’s all there is to it. Your efforts and your swordsmanship aren’t a waste. If you want to become stronger, you need to keep up your training.”

I feel like I’ve been stuck dealing with a jack-of-all-trades-type hero. Personally, since I’m not looking to be the world’s greatest anything, I wish he’d stop bothering me. Wanting to avenge himself is a very protagonist thing to do, but we’re not supporting characters in this story. It’s a hassle to deal with him coming to me every time he gains a new ace up his sleeve or acquires a bit of power. I mean, I have plenty of things I need to do, outside of fighting him.

“...Hold it, Immortal!”

I sense Eckesachs go from suspicion to certainty as she listens. In response to my lecture of questionable utility, she begins to glare daggers at me in obvious contempt.

“Your master is Suiboku, isn’t it? You’re the apprentice of the Immortal who abandoned me!”

Wait, what? That’s news to me...

Part 9 — The Truth

Hearing Eckesachs cry out, I thought back to a recent conversation I'd had with her.

"As difficult as it is to believe, you have the capacity to use any power you want. You're already strong enough as it is. Why do you seek my power so ardently? Based upon the effort you've expended, it's not simply a matter of vanity. Is there an opponent that even you cannot beat?"

"Yes, there's someone who is vastly stronger than I am. An Immortal named Sansui. I want to beat him. That's all."

"An Immortal… I see. That would make sense."

Yes, ordinarily the only reason I would possibly want Eckesachs would be to satisfy my own vanity. It's unlikely that there would be an opponent that I, of all people, could only beat using the ultimate sword.

But Sansui beat me easily, ultimate sword and all. It was a thoroughly one-sided affair. More importantly, the reason for my loss is something that I could grasp logically.

However, that raises a different question. Thinking about it rationally, it's just odd for a modern Japanese high schooler like Sansui to be as strong as he is. Sansui's strength has nothing to do with anything like magic. It's the strength born of finely-honed technique.

It's at a level that's beyond something like studying ancient martial arts at home in Japan. There's no way someone close to me in age, like Sansui, could possibly have reached this level of mastery. Even if Sansui had been trained from birth to be an Olympic-level martial artist, he wouldn't have that almost mythic level of mastery.

"Suiboku… That's your master's name, isn't it?"

Suiboku, the name Eckesachs had blurted out, was familiar to Douve. Actually, all of the members on the Sepaeda side seemed to have heard of the name.

But that's impossible. Eckesachs had spent the last thousand years waiting for a worthy wielder. There's no way someone could have received instruction from someone who had lived over a thousand years ago.

"So they've passed on the name Suiboku from generation to generation. For over a thousand years…"

Douve's older brother, the current lord of House Sepaeda, offers the most likely explanation. That idea would have been possible, at least.

Wait, that's still weird. Even if they had carried on the name Suiboku for over a thousand years, like a specific school, Sansui himself is still from Japan. That's beyond dispute; he confirmed it himself. No matter how strong the current bearer of the Suiboku name is, that shouldn't make Sansui this strong.

"Nonsense! An Immortal wouldn't die in a mere millennium or two!"

Hearing that made sense, but it also made me freeze up. Yes, the Immortal Arts are wielded by Immortals. And on Earth, the mythical

Immortals, as the name implied, could live for hundreds of years. If Sansui actually is an Immortal, he might not be as young as he looks.

"Answer me, youngster! Are you not the apprentice of my former wielder, Suiboku?"

"…Yes, that's correct. My Master's name is Suiboku… So far as I'm aware, he's been around for at least one thousand five hundred years. He's the one who taught me the blade and the Immortal Arts. While I cannot be certain, I believe he is the swordsman you describe."

After appearing surprised, Sansui regains his calm and acknowledges the words, which leaves me and the others in shock. With a teacher over 1,500 years old, just how old is Sansui himself?!

"It appears…that he never so much as mentioned me. That man abandoned me, after all."

"Yes, I'd never heard of you until now. However… He did mention a particular stage in his training," Sansui begins, quietly explaining to Eckesachs.

The kingdom's greatest duelist, and an even greater swordsman, one that even the ultimate sword considers the greatest in the world. The ruthless reality that is Suiboku's path.

"Training with the sword begins with swinging a stick. After enough repetition, you begin to build up muscle."

That's true. There's nothing wrong with that. That's how I became strong myself.

"You begin with a wooden sword, then start learning to swing a heavier sword, and eventually you become stronger."

He's still not saying anything out of the ordinary.

"At its root, strength with the sword is arm strength. Being able to swing a heavy sword is valuable in and of itself. This is particularly true if your opponent is wearing armor. That means that those who can swing a more powerful weapon, a special weapon, are the strong ones. The ultimate example of that being the Sacred Sword."

Yes, that's true. That can't be a mistake, either. So why did this Suiboku abandon Eckesachs? It's strange when you think about it. I couldn't even imagine what his reasoning was.

"The most skilled swordsman who possesses the ultimate blade… That's the ultimate swordsman. There was a time that my Master felt that was the truth…but it was only one stop on his journey."

A stop on the journey. So the place I'm at now is just a stage?

"He told me that, one day, he came to the realization that the logical end to that reasoning would be an existence that relies solely upon the weapon itself. That the strongest individual would therefore be the swordsmith who had created the greatest weapon."

There's a logic to that. But if you started going down that path, there's no end to it. What does that make me? My powers are something I received

from the gods, after all. Eckesachs was created by the gods. That makes it sound like my strength is all thanks to the gods.

“So, my Master took the next step and began to develop moves that weren’t reliant on the strength of the weapon. That is, he created moves like ultimate techniques and secret techniques.”

I can understand that, too. If that’s what I had lost to, I could accept that. I mean, I’ve been trying to create a secret technique that combines different magics. But I had combined all of my abilities, putting everything I had into one technique, and I was still easily brushed aside.

“When working to create such moves, he finally came to the realization that ‘forms’ like ultimate techniques and secret techniques would also lock his sword swings into unnecessarily formalized paths…and so he returned to basics, going back to swinging a wooden sword.”

“That’s what I thought! He told me all of this, and then he stopped using me entirely! He cast me aside and said he didn’t need me! That he would seek greater heights, so I should be used by a mortal swordsman instead!”

The reasoning hurts Eckesachs more than it does me. The fact that I, the chosen wielder of Eckesachs, easily lost to Suiboku’s apprentice would mean that Suiboku was right to abandon Eckesachs, after all.

“He told me, as an Immortal with infinite time, he would focus on perfecting his own craft, so I should help someone else! He said that when he abandoned me!”

“Actually… I think my Master abandoned you because… Well, you’re kind of loud and obnoxious.”

“Well, sure, he said that, too!”

“And my Master had already gone past the point of needing a practice partner, and had no one to use you against… So I’m sure it was boring for you, too…”

I see. So this Suiboku really stopped needing Eckesachs. I guess, just like how Sansui easily beat me, the greatest swordsman really doesn’t need the ultimate sword. The most powerful “blade” isn’t a physical weapon like a “Sacred Sword,” but rather an intangible quality like “swordsmanship.”

“Of course! Before he discarded me, that man would just spend every day practicing his swing, from morning to night!! And he did that for decades on end! Why should I put up with that?!”

“I think you are, in fact, the ultimate weapon. Normal people can’t spend ages on training like we can. Our strength is something that would ordinarily wind up a vague, theoretical idea. Using normal standards, I think it’s fine to consider your wielder the strongest swordsman.”

“Yet… The one who truly can be considered the greatest is a man like Suiboku.”

“That’s true, but... It might be odd, given what I said about what’s necessary and unnecessary, but there’s not really any need to be as strong as I am.”

Sansui is essentially saying his own strength is beyond meaning. He's not bragging; if anything, he's just mocking himself. He's not interested in showing off his strength. In fact, he might be a bit embarrassed by it.

"Saiga would be the only one to understand this example, but it's akin to taking a game that you can beat at around level 40 with high level equipment and choosing instead to challenge yourself to beat it with just your starting gear...then going beyond that and beating it only using the 'attack' command."

Yeah, I definitely get that example. If that's what you're spending your life doing, that's just so extreme. There are limits to how obsessively you can beat a game, after all.

Wait, speaking of which, just how much time has Sansui spent playing the game of life anyway?

"J-Ju... That is, well... Sansui, how old are you?" Blois, who serves as Douve's bodyguard alongside Sansui, hesitantly asks.

She's realized that the co-worker she thought was close to her in age is in fact much older. It's got to be a pretty horrible realization for her.

"A bit over five hundred."

No one laughed at those words. If anything, that was easier to believe. It would be much odder if he was this strong and was actually his apparent age.

"Still, not that I'm proud to say this, but I spent those five hundred years training. I'm not worldly, I have little in the way of education, and I'm a bit of a savage. That's not a misunderstanding on your part."

There's no way to beat someone who's trained for five hundred years with just a little bit of effort here and there. To Sansui, my efforts must have seemed like a late night cramming effort.

Well, that's actually what they were. It's perfectly reasonable for Douve and company to be less than impressed. I thought I'd trained hard after losing to Sansui, but it hasn't even been a month since my last duel with him. There's no way to overcome five hundred years of experience in that limited amount of time.

"No wonder I couldn't win."

If I had been told I could become the greatest with five hundred years of training, would I have been able to commit to those five hundred years?

Frankly, it wouldn't be a matter of quitting in the middle. I wouldn't have started training in the first place. I'm not that driven to be the best. Given that this man actually got through those five hundred years, there was no way I could even think about really challenging him to begin with.

"Wait, immortality?! Users of the Immortal Arts actually become immortal?!"

In a way, it's an obvious question, but the Regent is extremely enthusiastic about interrogating Sansui.

“It’s not true immortality. We just don’t age. Even an Immortal will die if you lop off his head.” Sansui responds very calmly to the rather excited Regent.

He’s being rather casual about it, I suppose because he no longer feels the need to hide anything.

“Oh, just so we’re clear. Lord Saiga, I have no intention of teaching you the Immortal Arts. My Master has yet to accept me as a fully trained Immortal yet, after all. More than anything, teaching the Immortal Arts takes far too long. Even if you were to train under my Master, it would take you… Wait, how long did it take me…”

“No, don’t worry about it.”

I may be able to learn all the Arts, but I already had no intention of learning the Immortal Arts. I honestly couldn’t picture myself holding up to five hundred years of training.

“Say, what do Immortals eat?”

“Mist.”

“Water?! Just water?!”

“I haven’t felt any hunger, lust, or the need to expel anything for the last few hundred years…”

The more I listen to his explanations, the less I can see him as a human. He really is a hard-core Immortal. Like, it’s not that he changed jobs at some temple or learned it at some school. He’s basically a legendary Immortal, like the ones from *Journey to the West*.

“I still want to sleep. I mean, there were times when my Master and I would sleep for about a week, if a storm wouldn’t let up.”

“That’s not just wanting to sleep!”

Wow. What am I impressed by? The fact that he keeps saying these ludicrous things and no one thinks he’s lying or exaggerating anything? Everyone is convinced that he would’ve *had* to live that way, so that he could be the way he is now.

“How do you learn the Immortal Arts?!”

“You wake up at dawn every morning and swing a wooden sword while surrounded by the vastness of nature. You do that until sunset every day, then go to sleep. You restart your training each morning with the sunrise, and you continue this routine for a lifetime.”

“For a lifetime?! What about your Flash Step? The Feather Step? The Ki Wave?!”

“After all of my practice, I noticed I could just sort of use them.”

Yeah, there’s no way around this. He’s just an Immortal.

“Which is why, over the past five hundred years, outside of my swordsmanship and the Immortal Arts, I’ve only learned how to weave a simple kimono and carve a wooden sword. It’s a bit embarrassing to think about that.”

Seeing Sansui go beyond mere modesty and into self-mockery, everyone present, me included, could do nothing but let out a bewildered sigh.

Part 10 — Assassination

Everyone seems to have accepted that I've been alive longer than this kingdom has existed. It's probably more accurate to say that they were glad to finally learn how I acquired my ridiculous level of skill with a sword. It's certainly an understandable sentiment. Even ignoring my youthful appearance, it's still an obvious oddity. However, if that skill is from five hundred years of training, well... It certainly makes more sense to them.

"So, to go back to an earlier subject, do you intend to marry Blois?"

Lady Douve and Blois don't seem to be overly bothered by learning that I've lived over five hundred years, once they understood that my appearance isn't some sort of disguise.

It's a fair point. I'd probably be a bit shocked if I'd learned Blois was actually an old woman. I mean, if it bothers me, then I can imagine it'd really bother them.

The truth, though, is that the Immortal Arts generally return one to nature rather than fight against it, so it doesn't allow things like transformations. It's possible to hide your presence somewhat, but that's about the extent of the deception possible.

In any case, Blois is evidently still in love with me, and Lady Douve has picked up on that thread.

Lady Douve decides to have this conversation after Lain has long since gone to bed, and I'm rather sleepy myself. It's a private conversation between a mistress and her bodyguards, and therefore takes place in a private room.

As for His Brothership and His Fathership, they've already taken the cavalry and returned to the capital.

"Well... In all honesty, I'm not sure if I'm able to feel lust after five hundred years of letting it go..."

I mean, I've been alive so long that I'm long past old age. I wasn't sure if my masculine biology was still functional. And even if the equipment still functioned as it was supposed to, could I feel desire for someone over five hundred years my junior?

From my point of view, the differences between Lain, Blois, Lady Douve, and the Regent were almost a rounding error. I mean, in an age sort of way. Of course, how they look was still important — I still have that sort of taste left in me.

"And I admit, I'm also worried that I might be throwing away hundreds of years of training."

The Immortal Arts and swordsmanship both involve getting rid of unnecessary things. Desire and people to protect are among the things that should be discarded. I've been a virgin for over five hundred years. Those things are also still a mystery to me.

"However, people falling in love is also a part of nature. I have no intention of denying that. And, if I ruin it by knowing a woman for the first

time, well, that's all it was worth. As for defending someone else, it's laughable that I'd even presume that much, given my immaturity. All that it would end up meaning is that I would decide my training was insufficient and thus start over."

Changing yourself means accepting that the person you had been up until now had been completely wrong. Admitting you had been wrong requires serious courage. But given that I, myself, still have much to learn, I need to proactively take steps in a new direction.

"And yet, there are other concerns."

"Well, I'm glad that you seem to understand. Right now, you're not exactly in love with Blois, are you?"

Blois looks extremely downtrodden. Understandable, given that I'm just talking about my own situation and haven't said a word about liking or desiring Blois herself. That's because I'm not seeking her nor do I desire her. I don't want to marry Lady Douve, and while I like the idea of marrying Blois, that doesn't mean I'm in love with anyone. I can remember those types of emotions, of course, but it's hard for me to treat them as real things.

"I would rather not leave her hanging, so I'd like to at least give it a try over the next year or so."

"That's pretty rude in and of itself, but I'm in agreement with that plan. Take a year or so and start thinking of Blois as a woman."

It seems Lady Douve was making a serious effort to think this through. I suppose a year is a meaningful period of time for her.

"After hearing that you've been alive for five hundred years, I started to panic a bit. I started asking myself if I might not end up single until both Father and Brother are long dead."

Neither Blois nor I could say anything to deny the possibility. There are times when Lady Douve takes advantage of it, but their obsession with her is a bit deranged. At this rate, she really does risk ending up being a spinster. Lady Douve has therefore reaffirmed her idea that there is a shelf life for women.

"Although, I hate to say this, but the men who try to court me are all rather terrible."

Lady Douve is of age. If she'd found a worthy partner, she likely would have forced the point, whatever the opposition. Which means, essentially, there's no one around worth her hand.

"And, what's worse, I don't really have an ideal type when it comes to men."

That's definitely a problem. If anything, Lady Douve's problems might be worse than mine, considering that she has a finite lifespan.

"In the worst-case, I'll settle for Sansui. You're still the least awful of all I've seen so far."

That would be a worst-case scenario for me, too. However, that doesn't solve the fundamental problem. What does she plan to do with His Fathership and His Brothership?

Even ignoring the fact that she'd be marrying me, I honestly don't think they'd accept.

"If it comes to that, Sansui, you'll have to kill them both."

That makes things even worse. I mean, it's not that I couldn't, it's just that it would make a terrible scenario that much worse. If I kill people, other than as part of my job as a bodyguard, that's going to make people consider me a threat. That's because there's no one I can't kill, once I decide to kill them. Consequently, everyone would live in fear of offending Lady Douve.

"Lady Douve, that's perhaps going too far…"

"I still plan to try to convince them, but at this rate, if some other kingdom's noble asks for my hand, they're liable to start a war over it."

That's plausible. I mean, they even charged their own daughter's estate. It was only a few hours ago, even.

"That's a much greater problem, you know. In which case, it'd be better to kill them and make it look like an accident. It'll be fine. Brother already has an heir. So long as I don't claim the title, it shouldn't be a problem, should it?"

I'm not really sure about that. I suppose it's right if we're talking about the feudal hierarchy by itself, as a system, but it's still kind of a problem for family members to target one another for assassination.

His Brothership and His Fathership have no hesitation about using force to keep Lady Douve from marrying. Lady Douve herself has no qualms about killing His Brothership and His Fathership in order to get married. Both sides seem beyond saving. Honestly, it seems like a problem for those two to be at the top of this hierarchy.

"It's still all a bit premature. I need to find a man first, after all. I do hope there's a better man than Sansui out there somewhere."

Hard to say. Lady Douve's standards are rather exacting, after all. I don't think we'll find one in this kingdom, at least.

I mean, it's questionable if there's anyone who'd even match up to her in any one area, never mind in multiple or all areas. Simply put, Lady Douve is a woman near the pinnacle in this kingdom. You could count on one hand the number of women who could best her with a combination of status, wealth, and beauty. Assuming we're ignoring personalities, anyway.

"Honestly, this is probably the greatest danger I've felt in my life."

She seems to be well aware of the challenge, and she doesn't look happy. After all, there aren't any men in the upper reaches of this kingdom's society that she doesn't already know. I suppose there's something a bit ironic about a woman who prides herself on being an unattainable beauty worrying about missing her chance for marriage, but neither Blois nor I could bring ourselves to laugh.

As such, our planning session ends. Leaving Lady Douve to her internal struggles, Blois and I leave the room. After, we chat like we did the other evening.

“I understand your position. I also understand that you don’t have any, well, desires for anyone, and it’s not just about me…”

She seems a touch anxious as she faces me to talk. It’s clear from looking at her that she’s struggling with an urge to turn away and blush. It’s something that someone could easily describe as ‘cute.’

But, in my case, the person who would do that describing is a version of me that no longer exists. It’s sort of nostalgic. Perhaps it would make more sense to describe it as a feeling directed at a young child, not a romantic interest.

“But, well, I… That is, I do love you… So I plan to do my best…to draw your interest.”

A beautiful woman dressed as an elegant knight fidgets. Despite being taller than I am, she blushes a faint shade of pink as she tries to get her affection across to me. It's a pleasant feeling, but I still don't feel any excitement. Perhaps this is closer to a type of rehabilitation therapy.

"Of course, I have no intention of it interrupting our duties. I want you to rest assured on that point. I can't afford to simply depend on you all the time."

Until now, we couldn't really afford to acknowledge each other as members of the opposite sex. Our priority has to be protecting Lady Douve. If one of us had prioritized the other's safety, rather than protecting Lady Douve, we would be worse than useless as bodyguards.

"I also will do my best to become a good mother for Lain."

"I see. I'm a lucky man."

"Also, if Lady Douve can't find another man, then I can accept being your concubine."

"I'd really like to avoid that, if possible."

That's really how I feel. Please, let there be someone so unique that he draws Lady Douve's interest, yet so understanding that he can also accept Lady Douve herself.

I suppose it's human nature to pray when the odds look bleak, but it's also generally meaningless and just an invitation for disappointment.

But humans still can't help praying. In that regard, I suppose I'm starting to regain my humanity.

Lady Douve's objective, until recently, was to entertain herself at the Academy. However, her current objective is to get married. Her elegance and grace basically vanished overnight.

But by finding out the existence of immortal beings like me, she's recognized that she, as a rose, has a finite time in which to bloom, and as a result she's started looking hurriedly for the romance of youth.

I'm not sure if it's natural or unnatural to start looking for a mate after learning of the existence of an immortal man. Thinking about it that way, the people in Japan who participated in marriage-seeking parties, whether men or women, had just acted naturally, and shouldn't have been targets of ridicule.

In any case, Lady Douve has also decided to remain at the Academy. Being close to the capital, the Academy was a convenient location to live while participating in high society's various social gatherings.

Essentially it means that we moved all this way to participate in marriage-seeking parties. Thinking about it from a Japanese point of view, this was definitely an overreaction, and in that case I would advise her to compromise with someone nearby. However, Lady Douve is a daughter of one of the Four Great Houses, meaning that acceptable partners were in limited supply.

Of course, that presupposes the assassination of His Fathership and His Brothership, but even putting that aside, the odds are grim. And in terms of possibilities and plausibility, it's a bit sad that assassinating the two of them is the easiest part of the whole process. All of us are a bit sad about it.

Putting all that aside, I've decided to meddle in the way only old people can, so now I'm looking for Saiga. I find him taking practice swings with Eckesachs in a field near the Academy early in the morning, and I approach him to talk.

"Good morning."

"Oh, 'morning!"

"Mmph. Ah, Suiboku's apprentice."

Eckesachs returns to human form. Seeing her next to Saiga feels a bit odd. They look far too different to be brother and sister, but it's also unnatural to consider them a couple. It's like getting an objective view of what Lain and I must look like on a daily basis.

Thinking about it, my Master, who previously wielded Eckesachs, looks younger than I do, so perhaps the two of them were well-matched.

"I was hoping to speak to you…"

"Oh, I wanted a chance to talk, too. I wanted to apologize…"

Saiga bowed his head properly in my direction, offering a sincere apology. Eckesachs, while not entirely pleased, follows suit.

"That is… I'm really sorry for trying to hit you with such a powerful attack."

"It's fine. I'm not dwelling on it."

I did caution him about it, but what did he think I was, exactly? Had that attack hit and killed me, would they have been able to celebrate afterwards?

Sure, for game characters, strength equals hit points, so you need to hit them multiple times with an ultimate technique to bring them down, but while I'm an Immortal, I'm also still flesh and blood. If anything, Saiga himself is that sort of character. His combat is based around his Mystic Arts, which means the better he gets, the greater his defenses.

His assumption that everyone is the same as him is what drove him into his particular rut. He's a good lesson on what happens when you don't question your assumptions. I need to be careful of that myself.

"I did want to make one correction, though."

"Correction?"

"Yes. While you only needed a minimum amount of power to fight me, it doesn't mean everything you've done is a mistake. At the very least, it's good that you can ask other people for help."

Usually, the cheat-equipped characters, the ones capable of most anything, will try to do everything themselves.

There's nothing wrong with that, necessarily, but if you view yourself as the only one capable of getting anything done, you usually end up short on labor.

There have been plenty of times where I only managed to cover all of my responsibilities with help from Blois. As a rule, my only method of attack is to approach someone and slash them, so I can get bogged down when there are too many opponents.

And, as Lady Douve is quick to point out, it's boring to watch. There are times when more elaborate attacks work better as warnings or as feints. A lack of spectacle doesn't have much ability to contain an opponent.

Part of what led Saiga to challenge me several times was my lack of flair. If I were similar to Saiga and used high-charged, elaborate attacks, he probably would have recognized the gap in skill and given up sooner.

"I don't know if it's a good idea to just keep piling on new abilities each time you run into an obstacle, but it's a good thing to be able to switch tacks when what you've been doing isn't working."

Then again, the reason he struggled so mightily this time was because he wasn't changing his methods. It'd be one thing if he thought one method didn't work, so he then shifted to another. In Saiga's case, he was repeating his method for bouncing back that he'd used before by obtaining a new woman… Err, I mean, a new power. Typically, a power he can't show off in public.

Since he lost in public, he should have trained with the goal of winning the rematch in public. Fighting where no one could see him, so he could use his hidden powers… That was probably a sign he'd lost his way.

"For example… That you reinforced your defenses, even though I was only using a wooden sword and knew how to pull my blows, was because you weren't sure you could handle taking my attack."

"…Errm."

"The reason you layer on more and more abilities is because you have no confidence in yourself without them."

"Yes…"

"The reason you fixated so much on defeating me, despite the lack of tangible benefit, was because you wanted to believe you only lost due to a mistake. It stems from your inability to accept defeat."

"You're right…"

I continue critiquing him using my own standards, but it seems I've struck a nerve. At least, he doesn't seem to have a good response to my criticism.

"However, your lack of confidence isn't wrong, and having a desire to improve yourself is a good thing. At the very least, you're trying to stand again and move on."

"Huh?"

"It's natural for someone your age to try to defend himself. If anything, not doing so is a form of arrogance. You contemplated our gap in ability, figured it was impossible to avoid an attack, and chose to reinforce your defenses. The reality was that you couldn't actually stop me, and so your judgment was correct."

“But that’s…”

“Your doubts about defeating me in one blow and about being able to hit me weren’t wrong, either. It’s just you should have learned more about feints and unbalancing moves. I would have preferred seeing that as your chosen direction. Or, since you can use magic, you could have tried a wide-area magic spell and worked on improving your aim.”

The problem is that he can’t hit me, so he should have put more effort into hitting me, rather than increasing the power of each attack. Even I can’t avoid a large enough wide-area attack. Of course, in that case, I’d have taken him down before he could attack.

Or, since the problem was my rapid movement, he should have learned a quick attack technique that took advantage of his precognition.

“You might think you’re in an RPG, but this is closer to a fighting game or an action game, so you need to think beyond just attack power. It’s good to try to fix your shortcomings, but you need to put more effort into understanding yourself and your opponent.”

“Hrmph…”

That’s something Eckesachs is aware of, as well. But admitting that would lead to the same conclusions my Master reached, which kept her from coming to that conclusion.

I don’t think she needs to worry so much. Ordinary people would never get there on their own, after all.

“Life is about training until the very end. You should try and try again, until you’re satisfied with the outcome. I’m sure it’s fun to acquire new powers, but you can’t let that become your goal. It’d be one thing if you were an Immortal like me, one who’s cut his ties to the mortal world, but right now you have far too many other things you need to accomplish.”

“Mr. Shirokuro…”

“You don’t need to be so formal. I might be five hundred years old, but I’m basically a NEET that’s been shut-in over those five hundred years. And my advice is partly penance for what I said the other day.”

I do wonder whether I have a right to say these things, given I spent five hundred years as a hermit, but yesterday, I completely rejected his life’s value. Well, it might be a bit too short to call it his entire life, but I did reject everything he’s done since coming here.

I don’t think I said anything that was wrong, of course, but it’s also not a good thing for him to take everything I said at face value.

“I’m me, and you’re you. It’s your life, so take time to discuss what’s important to you with those around you. Life is at least long enough to let you do that.”

“Right.”

“It might not be persuasive coming from me…but a life obsessed with winning and losing is stifling. Try not to focus too much on defeating your opponent.”

“…Alright.”

“Alright?! ALRIGHT?! Don’t you dare get emotional over a lecture from Suiboku’s apprentice! Winning is the purpose of being a swordsman!” Eckesachs erupts in anger, making a fair point herself in the process.

It’s true that, like my Master, I’m completely rejecting the purpose of her existence. There’s no need for Eckesachs if you don’t want to win.

“Why is it you and Suiboku spend so long on practice? Swinging a stick for hundreds, even thousands of years! It’s because you don’t want to lose! It’s because you want to win! That’s why you do it, isn’t it?!”

“That was…true at first…but that’s not enough reason to continue to train, after a certain point.”

The purpose of our school isn’t to kill or save, but closer to sport training. We don’t even spar. I’d spent all my time practicing, so the first time I defeated anyone was after leaving the woods.

“The desire to win is also a desire for conflict. Fighting itself brings its own dangers. Of course, I don’t mean to separate fighting from living, but… It’s less the thrill of victory than it is the joy of fixing my own flaws…”

I mean, since Immortals don’t eat or drink, why would they fight? It’s that we’re just swinging a sword instead of meditating.

“Besides, winning isn’t that fun… Having it escalate to a fight is a failure in and of itself.”

“Babbling with a pretension of enlightenment…”

“Eckesachs, I think Sansui actually is enlightened…”

I think it’s probably not wrong to call it pretentious. You train because you want to become stronger, and you steadily put in that effort because you don’t want to lose. In that regard, you could say that both my Master and I have a much greater aversion to losing than anyone else.

That really does make us shut-ins and NEETs.

“There has never been a point where I’ve been truly afraid of losing, at least not once I’d become an Immortal. That sort of fear adds unnecessary tension to your body, which causes all kinds of problems. A desire to win isn’t good for that, either.”

“Grrrm… It’s all the more irritating because you have a point…”

“I feel like I was that way until I lost to Sansui…”

“At any rate, the key is not to obsess too much. You’re the only one who can decide what’s important to you and thus worth caring about.”

There are times when people obsess about avoiding getting obsessed. That makes training so difficult.

In that sense, I guess I have it easy. After all, Lady Douve decides who I fight. If there’s a reason for me to fight other than to defend myself, it’s on Lady Douve’s orders. That means less pressure for me, and makes it easier for me to let go and forgive. Whether he’s willing to accept that sort of easy life is another matter entirely.

“But, at the very least, try to avoid challenging me from now on. I’ll try to avoid giving you any reason to, myself.”

“Sure… Eckesachs wasn’t happy with that, but Zuger stopped me.”

“…Hrmph!”

Good. People, not swords, should decide when and why to fight.

Seems the women around Saiga aren’t just pretty faces who just tell him what he wants to hear.

“But understand that I haven’t accepted you, Suiboku’s heir. Even if you prove that the greatest swordsman doesn’t even need a sword.”

Still, the sentient blade glares at me.

Having waited for longer than I had trained for her new wielder, I feel like she’s glaring at me and the presence of my Master behind me.

“There will be someone to take up Saiga’s mantle. Even if you have an eternity, you will spend that eternity in fear. One day there will be one who surpasses Saiga, you, and Suiboku!”

“And that would be a good thing. It gives me more reason to commit to my training.”

I look forward to that time, if it ever comes. I only hope that I’m still around to enjoy it.

Part 11 — Enmity

“Have you had a chance to read my report? I’m sorry if it was just a collection of big words. I’m afraid that’s just the scholar in me.”

“No, the contents were perfectly understandable. For that matter, it’s not even out of the ordinary.”

“I see. You understand, then. There’s no way to create something to challenge him with our current technology.”

As House Batterabbe vouches for Saiga, House Sepaeda does the same for Sansui.

The reason the kingdom’s government takes no measures against them, despite their abilities far surpassing what an individual can ordinarily wield, is because the heads of the most powerful noble houses outside of the Royal Family have given their assurance that they pose no threat.

If a problem occurs, the patron family would take responsibility. That assurance is enough to calm most concerns.

So, who sponsors the Academy here in the Royal Lands, and in effect, stands above the Regent?

It goes without saying that it’s the Royal House of Arcana.

“So, you are admitting to defeat?”

Setenve Arcana, eldest daughter of the House Arcana… She listens to the Regent, a woman known as the Great Sage for her wisdom, gives her report, and accepts its conclusions without any sign of irritation.

“I’m a scholar, a servant to research. For me to refuse accepting failure is to deny my own existence.”

“I appreciate that. We have no need for optimism.”

Chimaeras and golems are powerful weapons. It’s not rare for there to be individual specimens that take dozens of magic-wielding knights to take down.

Yet, battlefields are still dominated by knights. The difficulty in controlling chimaeras and golems is one reason for that, but another is the sheer cost involved.

Even when talking about an unmanned weapon, they aren’t worth their cost if they can be taken down by a few dozen knights. Despite this fact, in recent years the Academy has poured an enormous amount of money into researching golems and chimaeras. Why? To defeat Sansui.

“The idea wasn’t bad. Just in terms of raw firepower, Sansui… That is, Sir Sansui… He isn’t as powerful as a dedicated mage.”

“Ki Infusion… That is, an Immortal Arts-reinforced wooden sword, and his unarmed Ki Wave…those are his means of attack, and what we decided to focus on.”

Sansui generally defeats his opponents in a single blow. That’s simply because Sansui’s attacks are superior to his opponent’s defenses.

“That’s the extent of his raw firepower…”

“That’s true, and that remains the case. He doesn’t have much in the way of offensive capability. Even if he’s capable of taking on a hundred elite knights and overwhelming them without effort, that doesn’t mean he has raw power equivalent to hundreds of people.”

Create a tough enough golem or a chimaera that can shrug off Sansui’s Ki-Infused blade or Ki Wave… If they can manage that, they could put an end to Sansui’s invincibility. That was the idea behind the research.

“However, after Saiga’s first defeat, I made a discovery when analyzing the wounds he sustained from the Ki Wave. It’s a strike that vibrates a living creature’s body… Chimaeras, being unnatural creatures, can’t avoid having weak points, and thus they can’t avoid damage from a Ki Wave…”

“And since he can lighten objects other than himself with his Feather Step… Well, that would be a problem for golems…”

“Yes, he could destroy a golem by dropping it from the air and using its own weight against it. They stand no chance.”

There’s no way a chimaera that lacks precision and a golem that lacks agility could beat Sansui. In fact, neither could hit him.

However, there’s no need to actually defeat him. Just the existence of something Sansui can’t defeat or destroy… That alone would have been enough.

Unfortunately, the conclusions only reinforced his invincibility.

“That damned Lightning Slasher…”

The Princess grips the report tightly, taking out her hatred on the paper.

“While I’ll miss the research budget, I’d feel bad if I lied to you… So, what will you do? Give up?”

“…I see no reason to give up.”

“That’s fine, but, at the very least, you won’t be able to match him without help. If the foundation of his strength really is backed by five hundred years of training…”

No matter how powerful the Rare Art user, there’s always some way to defeat them. That’s typically to assemble around ten users of the same Rare Art. There are always means of overcoming that difference. Even with preternaturally gifted users, considered the best of the best, they can be defeated if you assemble ten well-trained, first-rate wielders of the same Art.

At least, that’s true in combat. Or, at least, it was true until that man appeared.

“It’s simply not realistic to gather those with talent in the Immortal Arts and apprentice them to some Immortal to counter him.”

“No, not if it takes five hundred years… I question whether our kingdom would even still exist at the end of it.”

When considering soldiers, the cost of equipment and the length of training are factors that need to be weighed. No matter how weak the soldiers, if you can get away with cheap equipment and minimal training, then they can be considered an effective force in spite of their

shortcomings. They can be easily replaced when they die. That's been an important consideration for every army in every military in history.

At the opposite end of that spectrum is the man named Sansui. He possesses a strength that can only be attained by someone with talent that's possessed by one in every thousand people, developed over five hundred years of training. There's no way to factor that in when putting together a regular armed force.

While it can't be factored into that force, it's also a presence that can't be defeated by the combined might of every soldier working together.

"Your Highness, perhaps it's best to simply let him be. The man has little in the way of desires and not a shred of ambition. And unlike our neighbors, I doubt House Sepaeda has any interest in a coup d'etat."

"We've known that from the start. I'm not planning to weigh the interests of the kingdom and the interests of the Royal Family against each other."

In the Arcana Kingdom, there are times where the interests of the Royal Family and the interests of the kingdom don't align.

Sansui may not be suited for mass destruction, but if an enemy country sends in an Immortal as an assassin, he would be the only one capable of handling them. He's the one man who could potentially turn around a dire situation. The problem is that his existence also reduces the influence of the Royal Family.

"I don't want to kill him, nor do I want to inflict a permanent injury on him. I just want someone who can counter him, like what House Batterabbe possesses."

Of course, even House Batterabbe's son-in-law Saiga had lost, despite wielding the Sacred Sword.

At the same time, he's gained an absolute strength of a different type from Sansui. To put it simply, his stature has grown.

"The ideal, of course, would be to have a warrior who can best him pledge fealty to the Royal House. But it doesn't need to be that clear-cut. We, the Royal Family, need someone who can at least make people believe that they can counter him."

Sansui and Saiga have already claimed the mantle of the first and second most powerful individuals in the kingdom. They've done so to such an extent that they've put a huge gulf between themselves and the ones ranked third and below.

"Your Highness... Do you still begrudge the fact that the master swordsman defeated your Royal Guard?"

"...It's not a grudge, exactly. I despise him. If he weren't useful to the kingdom, I'd have him killed. Not that it's even feasible to do so."

"I would have preferred not to fight them."

The Royal Family and those around them call the Baby-Faced Master Swordsman the 'Lightning Slasher.'

The absolute master, who defeated the Royal Family's direct retainers, the kingdom's most elite Sword and Shield Companies, with a single wooden sword. The ultimate duelist, who crushed the Royal Family's authority, leaving witnesses only able to whisper his name in fear and reverence.

"Oh my, you're speaking like a tyrant now. How barbaric."

"My apologies... However, this leaves me no choice but to find an incomparable piece of my own, like House Batterabbe has."

There's no guarantee that things that happened in neighboring kingdoms won't happen here. Securing stability requires an absolute, unquestionable power.

"Oh dear, I suppose it's hard to be a Princess..." The Sage chuckles, as though she's reached a realization.

Yes, based on her long experience, she knows. In situations like this, circumstances are usually already beyond salvaging.

"And to think, all Four Great Houses might each already have exceptional talents of their own..."

Part 12 — Visitors

“Look, there’s a grave here…”

“How could that be?”

“Quite a few visitors lately, it seems.”

“Th-The hell did this brat come from?!”

“Calm down. You know what to do with witnesses.”

“It’s been quite a while since I’ve had hostility directed at me. But there is no need for violence. I dug the grave. What do you wish to know?”

“…Is this grave recent?”

“Yes. A woman carrying a silver haired baby was killed by wolves. As I thought her religion would frown upon being eaten by wolves or birds, I buried her. Of course, since I buried her without a coffin, the insects below-ground must have eaten her.”

“A baby with silver hair?!”

“Where did you put the baby?!”

“I thought it a pity to let it die, so I gave it to my apprentice and sent him to raise her in civilization.”

“Your apprentice?! This brat’s not as young as he looks!”

“A Rare Arts user, then?!”

“Sigh. I would prefer if you wouldn’t use magic in these woods…”

“…We’re leaving. Reporting comes first!”

“You sure?”

“Getting a report back is more important than killing any witnesses.”

“Ah, they fled… Wise of them, yes. Understanding one’s role regardless of how others may first appear, or how strong they may be, and focusing on fulfilling that obligation… Proof they understand their purpose, and a sign they’ve not let their power go to their heads. There’s something to be said for seeing wise opponents.

“Still… For a woman to come to such an uncivilized wilderness area with just the clothes on her back, and to have men come looking for her… It seems there is a great storm brewing. Regardless, a storm is but a twist in the air, part of the water cycle, a tiny flicker in the affairs of men. Battling over territory, food, the right to mate with a good partner, supremacy in a pack… People, too, are animals who are merely a part of nature. Their actions differ little from beasts.

“No doubt you will be fine, but try not to view people as anything too unique, my apprentice.”

Chapter 2 — The Prince Who Dances with Shadows

Part 1 — Hopes

It might be a bit late to be explaining this, but as they're called the Four Great Houses, there are, in fact, four great noble Houses.

House Sepaeda and Batterabbe, both of which form the kingdom's military backbone; House Caputo, which holds a great deal of religious influence; and House Disea, with its financial power. All exist to support the Royal House of Arcana. These houses make up the political foundation of the Arcana Kingdom. It was a hierarchy drilled into me while in House Sepaeda's lands.

"Douve, it's been a while."

"You seem well, Paulette."

Of course, the daughters of the other Houses are equal in stature to Lady Douve. Unlike with Happine, she avoids treating her opposite number disrespectfully, this time. I feel like there's a contradiction there, personally. At any rate, Lady Douve greets Paulette Caputo pleasantly when she appears at the estate.

"To what do I owe the pleasure? Last I heard, you were rather busy with running your territories, or the churches in your territories, or something like that, were you not?"

"Ah, yes, I'd forgotten that you have so little involvement in such matters. Unfortunately, I'm afraid I've got a rather delicate matter on my hands, at present."

Lady Douve has a supple body with generous curves and exudes the air of an evil seductress. By contrast, Lady Paulette looks more the part of a noble young lady, with a very genteel attitude. More directly, she's the very image of a holy maiden. Their personalities are as different as their looks, but perhaps because their interests don't clash, they've always been close. At the same time, Lady Paulette, well, she rather…

"I would like to borrow your bodyguard, the master swordsman."

Well, for some reason, she's always liked me a lot. It's close to a form of worship.

Blois looks a bit concerned, standing next to me behind Lady Douve, but I wish she'd relax. It's not that I like evil seductresses, but nor do I particularly like holy maidens, either. I doubt she feels any romantic feelings toward me, either.

"Sansui? Whatever for?"

"Some of the exiled nobles that we've been sheltering in our lands seem to be involved in a fracas in the city. Of course, according to witness statements, the exiled nobles are the ones entirely at fault…"

After a revolution in a neighboring country, their nobles fled to our kingdom.

Because a handful are distantly related to House Sepaeda, a few of them have settled in Sepaeda territory, and both His Brothership and His Fathership have gone beyond treating them with disrespect to just flat-out

ignoring them. As a martial family, House Sepaeda has no patience for "losers."

Basically, their view is that they've provided them a place to live, and therefore the rest is up to the exiles. Given that both the current and previous lords feel that way, their retainers care even less. As a result, some of the families have gotten frustrated and left.

Lady Douve also despises these exiles. Hearing "exiled noble" is enough to visibly sour her expression.

From the exiles' perspective, getting close to Lady Douve is their one shot at turning things around. Whether they choose to put down roots in this kingdom or attempt to regain what they've lost, getting one of the Four Great Houses in your corner is absolutely the right call.

If you could marry Lady Douve, daughter of the main line, it would be a direct route to power, and one with few equals. That the lady in question is beautiful just makes her even more appealing. Of course, that's the sort of thinking that Lady Douve detests more than any other.

"Just toss them in a cage and throw away the key."

"That's about all they're worth, yes, but unfortunately… Well, the party involved in the altercation is a foreign gentleman, and he just won't listen to me. It appears he doesn't trust me, and according to him, 'I have done nothing to be ashamed of, so there is no reason for me to cooperate with your interrogation.'"

Then why not just leave the kingdom? I can understand not trusting a foreign country's legal system, but to completely refuse to cooperate is something else entirely.

"The exiles are using his refusal to testify as a pretext to cause trouble. They claim that the other party won't cooperate because he has something to hide, and insists this refusal to cooperate is evidence that they're innocent, and so they're demanding that we arrest the other party…"

"Why not just hang both parties…?"

Lady Douve, that's likely to trigger a war. Putting the foreign gentleman to one side, the exiled nobles would go straight into revolt. No doubt they'd be crushed quickly, but they'd still do damage.

"For my part, I would like to properly punish the exiles for their crimes. A single punishment can deter a hundred others. And…I would also like to properly apologize to the foreign gentleman. So I would like him to testify properly."

"Are you planning to have Sansui defeat that foreigner?"

"Yes, that's correct."

Wait, we know we're at fault and they still want me to smack him with my wooden sword? Even Lady Douve has nothing to say. To beat someone down and then apologize to them after shows some rather damaged logic.

"Just in case you're operating under a mistaken impression, it's not as though I actually want to hurt him. It's just that he said, 'If you want me to testify, you'll have to defeat me in combat.' The exiled nobles know this, so

if we let them be, they'll probably fight him in an effort to be rid of him. I just want to borrow your bodyguard to deal with this before it escalates any further."

"You believe that Sansui, this kingdom's greatest duelist, could defeat this foreigner without hurting him?"

"Yes, that's the idea."

Seems I'll end up fighting someone who enjoys a good match. No doubt the exiled nobles carry plenty of responsibility for this, but this gentleman sounds like he has a healthy bloodlust himself. I wouldn't normally feel much enthusiasm for fighting another Japanese person like Saiga, but if he's a pure swordsman... I have to admit, I'm a bit curious.

"I have faith that your Baby-Faced Master Swordsman can accomplish this."

"Well... If that's the situation, then since you're the one asking, I'll allow it. I did have one thing I wanted to ask, though."

Blois and I can't help but have a bad feeling about this.

"How is that man's face?"

"He's quite handsome."

"Blois, Sansui, prepare yourselves. We're going."

I feel like Lady Douve's failings are even more apparent lately. She's not even twenty, but I guess she's starting to get desperate. There's no malice in Lady Douve's feelings; if anything, there's even a touch of sadness there.

It doesn't take long to get moving once Lady Douve makes her decision. She only has Blois and I as her attendants, and as Lady Paulette has just arrived, we really only need to get into the carriage.

"Lady Douve, are we moving again?"

"No, think of this as a little trip."

"Yes ma~am!"

Lady Paulette had brought two carriages with her, perhaps already operating under the assumption we'd accompany her. So we simply get into the carriages and start on our way.

"We're moving rather quickly..."

"Yes, we have no time to waste. There's no need to worry about tiring the horses. I will use my Mystic Arts to replenish their stamina."

They're not quite as speedy as cavalry horses, but the House Caputo draft horses are still quite fast. It's not just the fact that there's six of them per carriage, increasing their total "horsepower," but the drivers are pushing them pretty hard. Since horses are animals, pushing them would ordinarily wear them out, but Lady Paulette plans to use her Mystic Arts to heal them.

In my case, the ability comes directly from God, but in this world, there are bloodlines that are more likely to produce Rare Arts users. Sunae, the foreign princess, is from one of those lineages, and her family is more likely to produce users of Spirit Possession.

Similarly, there are lineages in this kingdom that are more likely to produce mystics. In this kingdom, that lineage is House Caputo, one of the Four Great Houses.

This is pretty much universal among the various countries, but abilities that allow the healing of the injured and sick tend to be connected to religion. That simply stems from the ease of recruiting followers by using those abilities. In addition, it's easy to get special treatment from those in power if you can heal them. It doesn't require much explanation.

With this special lineage, it's unsurprising that House Caputo is one of the Great Houses.

"You never do seem to change, Master Sansui."

"I'm afraid I have a permanent baby-face…much to my embarrassment."

The two carriages have been divided up, with one carrying the nobles and another carrying the various attendants, mostly servants and bodyguards. All of the House Sepaeda party are riding in the noble carriage, and even Lain, who is just my daughter and not particularly noble, is along for the ride. The only people riding in the noble carriage from House Caputo are the driver and Lady Paulette. I have my doubts about the propriety of the arrangement.

"I had heard that you secured an unquestionable victory over House Batterabbe's future son-in-law."

"It's not exactly a victory I'm proud of…"

It's most likely she's referring to the first, public duel. I don't doubt that it was now the subject of gossip. The rematches, on the other hand, would be a significant problem, should they become public.

The stuff about the Sacred Sword aside, the whole thing about Saiga being able to use all of the Arts and my being five hundred years old… Well, both Houses have an interest in keeping that information from proliferating.

"It is a balm to my soul that the kingdom's greatest swordsman is a man as gentle as you, Master Sansui." Lady Paulette smiles serenely. The smile is pleasant to see, but I feel she's going a little overboard in her praise. I'm really not all that I'm cracked up to be.

"My House also has soldiers in our service, but all of them are a touch overzealous… A fact that pains me to see."

They're bodyguards of a House that has a strong religious connection. Their dedication's probably got a substantial pious dimension to it.

I mean, with their responsibility to protect a mystic holy maiden-ish master, I can see why they'd put their utmost into defending her. A part of me is almost jealous.

"I must note that I do appreciate their efforts to defend those without strength, such as myself and our innocent subjects. Yet I am afraid I can never quite come to love them as I ought to. There is a certain ugliness in how I preach forgiveness and absolution on the one hand, and protect myself with swords and shields on the other."

“There’s nothing unusual or wrong about it. Criminals exist everywhere.”

“And yet, according to our faith’s teachings, it’s those people, those who had no choice but to stain their hands with evil, that are most in need of a helping hand. To them we owe our mercy. If we simply restrain them by force, we invite only their enmity. Witnessing your way of fighting was a revelation, Master Sansui. You, the greatest warrior in this kingdom, doing your utmost to refrain from harming your opponents, striving to stop them with the minimum amount of force necessary. In your remarkable techniques, I saw a manifestation of my ideal warrior!”

She lost me a few sentences ago, but Lady Paulette continues heaping praise upon me. Frankly, Lady Douve, Blois, and I are a bit unnerved by this.

"So you think Papa is amazing, Lady Paulette?"

"Yes. Your father is not simply strong, he is also extremely kind."

I'm also the man who tied up a bandit and left him to be devoured by wild wolves. Even if it was on Lady Douve's orders, I have to wonder at times if I hadn't gone too far.

"Master Sansui, the greatest warrior in this kingdom, acts with a calmer, more peaceful attitude than any soldier of the land, and refrains from unnecessary demonstrations of his ability. That was a source of hope for me…"

"I feel that may be too much to ask of your bodyguards…"

"Yes, I understand that. However, you helped me understand that if complete mastery of the martial path leads to mercy, then there is redemption to be found even there."

Being powerful because you can cast magic means that you are able to destroy your enemies with elaborate displays, and wield power that is far in excess of what you need to kill your opponent. Of course, such power has meaning as a form of deterrence. That, too, is something bodyguards must possess.

However, what my Master sought as his ideal was something else entirely. He sought an ideal that required no need to kill or intimidate, an ideal that could only be reached by mastery, then by going beyond what was possible by pure skill alone. Further, my Master wasn't fixated on killing his opponents. That, too, is reflected in my own swordsmanship.

"The ability to choose whether or not to kill was something my Master deliberately sought to acquire."

"Yes, which is a wonderful thing!"

As someone associated with medicine and religion, Lady Paulette must dislike bloody violence. That's the right mindset in its own right, and I think extremely admirable. In some ways it's probably natural for someone like her to admire a wielder of the Immortal Arts and swordplay like me, as one who fights in a rather subdued fashion. Still, I can't help but think she's the one who ought to be admired.

"Even then, in the end I'm still hurting people. Your healing arts are far superior to my abilities in that regard."

I have nothing to be ashamed of in my five hundred years of training. Still, it's something that starts and ends with me and my Master, contributing nothing to society at large. At a minimum, the fact that she's healed so many people has helped them and been a source of hope for everyone else.

She’s the one who has gone out of her way to help and save people. Over my five years of life in mortal society, the only person I’ve really saved is Lain. She should have more confidence in her influence.

“Your modesty is humbling.”

“I’ve far to go to match my Master, is all.”

“Say, Papa, is Lady Paulette someone important?” Lain innocently asks a question that’s hard to answer.

“Yes, she is. She’s about as important as Lady Douve.”

“Oh, I see~~.”

Blois turns away and avoids meeting my gaze. I understand what she’s feeling. Regardless of their relative status, their humanity is nowhere near comparable. It’s quite a stretch to put Lady Douve and Lady Paulette on the same level. But people who are more forgiving of people’s failings are less likely to mind flawed people. In that sense, Lady Paulette doesn’t seem to mind being treated as being equal to Lady Douve.

“Your retainers do love you, don’t they, Douve?”

“Naturally.”

Part 2 — Camping

A journey from the Academy, which is located in the Royal Lands, to a territory governed by one of the Four Great Houses, takes some time.

It would be suicide to travel by carriage on unlit paths through the dark of night. Even if you can alleviate their fatigue, forcing horses to run without sleep is still pushing your luck a bit too far. As such, there are times throughout the journey where sleeping in the carriages becomes necessary. That, or getting out of the carriages and setting up camp.

We spent the entire day with the horses running at full speed, but we're probably still in the Royal Lands. With the sun setting, the two carriages are stopped in the middle of the road, some distance from the nearest sign of civilization.

"You can leave the burden of handling protection to our House's paladins."

Grateful for Lady Paulette's offer, I decide to turn in early.

I think people should go to sleep when the sun sets and wake up when the sun rises. I realize this belief doesn't have the force of logic behind it, but that had been my lifestyle over five centuries, so I'd like you to accept it as something inevitable.

At the very least, Lain seems sleepy as well. The weather is still rather warm, so sleeping in the open at night, with the caress of the breeze, is quite comfortable.

"Sleeping already... Aren't you being a bit too lazy?"

"Cut me some slack... You know I get really sleepy if I don't go to bed when the sun sets. And you're not one to talk. Shouldn't you be staying close to Lady Douve?"

"This won't take long. Could you stay awake until we're done?" Blois says, with a touch of asperity, then takes a seat next to me.

The campfire the Caputo bodyguards are huddled around is a short distance away, meaning I can't see her face very well. With the light of a fire nearby, your eyes can't really pick up starlight, either. I vaguely remember that being influenced by how your pupils are dilated. But I can tell just from her voice that she is nervous.

"Do you... Could it be that you prefer women like Lady Paulette?"

"Not at all. I mean, well, compared to Lady Douve, it's as you guess."

"That's not what I wanted to ask... I just started to wonder if you preferred someone more innocent and prim, like her..."

I suppose she has a point. There's no one like a holy maiden around me. Lain's not part of that equation, Blois is more imperious and dignified, and Lady Douve is more feminine, for better or for worse.

"Knowing that I couldn't act that way...made me anxious, and I felt the need to ask..."

"Relax, I don't have any preferences like that at the moment."

"I see..."

“Still, I think she’s worthy of admiration. That much is true.”

“…Yes. My loyalty is to Lady Douve, but I admire Lady Paulette.”

Evidently reassured, Blois then returns to Lady Douve’s carriage.

I suppose when it comes to love, even the most stoic person feels a wide range of emotions. Was there a time when I was like that? At least I never had an opportunity to ask someone about their preferences...

“Say, Douve.”

“Something the matter, Paulette?”

“Do you think men prefer women like you?”

The same topic was being discussed inside the carriage. The three of them are around the same age, after all. I’m glad I’m outside. I don’t think I could handle being in the same room with this conversation going on.

Blois has stopped in front of the carriage, clearly thinking twice about going back inside.

“Well... I suppose there are plenty of men who approach me. No doubt my family connections and my beauty are both desirable for most gentlemen. I enjoy teasing men like that, but marrying them is another matter…”

“That makes sense... You wouldn’t want to spend your life with a shallow person…” Lady Douve, who I think exemplifies women you’d bed but not marry, says some pretty harsh things of her own.

I suppose the seductress in training has her own opinions on what matters. I know it’s a pretty disrespectful thing to think, but I would also like to make clear that this seems the appropriate opinion.

“…So what does it make me, given that I’m in love with such a shallow person…” Lady Douve is at a loss for words as Lady Paulette spills an honest and serious concern to her. No doubt she wasn’t expecting that sort of romance talk from someone who seems like a holy maiden.

Hearing the voices spilling out of the carriage, Blois has frozen in place outside. It’s not like her hearing is particularly sharp like mine, but still, it’s quiet enough that she can hear the conversation.

“Y-You’re in love with someone? Didn’t you have a fiancé already?”

“I broke off the engagement, for various reasons…”

I can feel their emotions from the carriage as I try to get comfortable on the ground, sensing their presence while they have a conversation they think is private. It’s not something I feel I have any right to listen to, but it seems Lady Paulette isn’t acting solely on the basis of her private feelings.

“...Say, Douve. I owe you a substantial favor for helping me with this incident. I hope this piece of information will go some part in returning it.”

“Information?”

“House Sepaeda has Master Sansui, the kingdom’s most powerful duelist, while House Batterabbe has acquired a mystic who wields the Sacred Sword by having Saiga marry into the family. Following me so far?”

“Yes... What about it?”

“House Caputo and House Disea have their own…powerful individuals, who are strong enough to act as unbeatable last resorts.”

I can’t quite put a name to the emotion I felt when I heard those words. Acceptance, surprise, joy. It was a vague feeling that wouldn’t fit any one of them. But it was also not unexpected.

“While he’s completely not suited for dealing with this sort of problem, if I wanted to just kill the foreign gentleman, I would have simply asked our last resort for help. That’s just how powerful he is.”

“But he can’t help but kill his opponent.”

“Yes. Douve, you really should appreciate Master Sansui’s gentleness more. I recall thinking of Master Sansui when he joined your House, but at the same time, I was again impressed at the depth of Master Sansui’s caution and restraint.”

Power tempts those who have it. Lady Douve embodies that idea. And it’s a difficult temptation to resist.

“House Caputo’s ace in the hole sits on the opposite end of the spectrum as House Sepaeda. He can never do anything without trying too hard and then he hurts himself…but that’s, well… It’s what I find adorable…”

“I-I see…”

“You value and trust Master Sansui as your bodyguard, yes? I wouldn’t be able to leave such a thing to him…”

Well, sure. That’s at least one thing I’ve never made Lady Douve worry about. I may be considered dull, but that also means I can consistently use my abilities, regardless of the situation. Further, there’s never been a situation where using my skills resulted in unexpected collateral damage.

I’ve learned a lot over a long period of time. Just how difficult it is to control your power. If House Caputo’s ace in the hole hasn’t been in this world for more than a year, asking him to control that power is the wrong thing to expect of him. At the very least, Saiga wasn’t capable of exerting that kind of control. He and those around him were looking for a reason to fight. That’s natural, but it’s not commendable.

“…So, how should I report this to my brother and father? They won’t find it useful to be told ‘that man’ or the ‘ace in the hole.’”

“House Caputo’s ace in the hole… His name is Kyobe Shouzo. He’s known as the ‘Scarred Fool’ or the ‘Cursed Farmer.’ I don’t know who House Disea’s ace in the hole is, but evidently he’s called the ‘Thinking Man.’”

“…Rather unlike you to be so vague with your information.”

“Would you have believed anyone who told you of Master Sansui’s abilities before you saw them for yourself?”

At those words, the three members of House Sepaeda, myself included, all nodded in understanding. If someone had explained my accomplishments solely through word-of-mouth, the response would have been skepticism, not acceptance.

“I don’t want to phrase it this way, but my ace is nowhere close to your Master Sansui. He can’t control his power at all. That is why I keep him close to me, but that must be difficult for him to deal with… However, in terms of potential danger, he’s a much bigger threat than Master Sansui. The same can be said of House Disea’s ace. He’s as far away from calm or dull as it’s possible to be.”

I can’t see through obstacles. I can only read emotions and presences. I’m simply eavesdropping on this conversation, and I can only hear it through the carriage walls thanks to the quiet night.

I wonder what sort of expression they’re wearing, and just what it is they’ve seen.

“You mustn’t taunt House Disea. If you drive them into a corner, they might use their ace in the hole. No matter how much confidence you have in Master Sansui, it would end up being a battle between allies.”

“Allies?”

“This is something your brother and father will soon realize, but…a time is coming when these four aces will need to work together. It will happen sooner rather than later.”

People seek power. As animals, that’s a natural thing to desire. Stronger, tougher, larger. That’s the logic of evolution. The story of living things has been to find adaptations that ensure survival. It’s a story that’s gone on for much longer than the existence of humanity.

And when something has grown large enough, it seeks more food. This is in order to continue to grow stronger. But the purpose of growing stronger isn’t for strength’s sake. It’s to survive. In that sense, strength itself isn’t always necessary. If you end up creating unnecessary conflicts and die as a result, that, too, is an evolutionary dead-end.

Determining what is and what isn’t a necessary conflict and choosing between them is difficult. Lady Douve, in particular, will do anything she can to hold on to me as her ultimate weapon, and as a consequence, be tempted to take out rival aces. Even if it means using her own ace.

“…So you just revealed your hole card to me.”

“I would prefer not to use him. He is far too effective. Perhaps it’s not my place to say it, but actually being that effective in action will put constraints on his life. I would prefer for him to remain a fool. I know it’s selfish of me, but I, as an individual, want him to stay the way he is now.”

Such a gentle soul. That’s what I thought as I drifted off to sleep. I don’t plan to forget what I heard, but I don’t plan on changing my ways or losing faith in the days I’ve lived through till now. I will continue to think on the days I have lived rather than the days to come.

Part 3 — Corruption

"...What is the meaning of this?"

There wasn't a serious difference in climate between the Royal Lands and the Caputo territories, and being in the same country, there wasn't much difference in terms of culture. If I had to name a distinction, it would be the fact that there were more impoverished people visibly wandering the streets. Providing charity and social services is popular among the locals, so the sick and ill who have no other recourse seek treatment here in the Caputo territories. In a sense, the fact that the exiled nobles were causing problems here is an unintended consequence of that mercy.

There are quite a few people lined up in front of us, seeking treatments up to and including the use of the Mystic Arts. That itself isn't unusual, but all of them clearly have the physiques of knights and warriors. Their wounds were clearly combat injuries of one sort or another and the group had obviously been involved in a losing battle.

"Just to confirm, Blois..."

"...They're not at that level, no."

Several dozen defeated warriors. The sight must have brought my defeat of the Royal Guard to mind, and Lady Douve went to Blois for confirmation as to whether they were, in fact, equal to my former opponents.

Blois rejects the comparison. While they've clearly received combat training, they're inferior to elites like the Royal Guard. They're fully trained soldiers, but not first-rate elites. Of course, it wouldn't be wise to make any sweeping judgments based on seeing the injured ones arrayed in front of us.

"Are you not listening, Lord Nuri? What, pray tell, is the meaning of this?!" Lady Paulette asks, with barely contained rage at the scene in front of her. At the receiving end of her glare is the nobleman who had egged on these warriors.

"...This is an issue that affects our entire house, Lady Paulette. I certainly cannot punish the loyal retainers who felt the insults we received were intolerable."

I've put a lot of effort in not allowing my prejudices to get the better of me, but I've never seen such obviously corrupt nobles before. If anything, trying not to judge him is a form of prejudice, in this case. He wears expensive and elaborate outfits, but is obviously out of shape. He's not fat because he's suffering from illness; it's just because he indulges in culinary excess. I get the impression he's fat because he exclusively eats fattening dishes. This wasn't a case of a poor person eating fatty foods because they couldn't afford anything else. This was just him being unwilling to eat anything else, or put in the work to keep the pounds off.

The fat noble, Nuri, while perhaps a little panicked, was still defiant. Despite the fact that his forces had been thrashed, he's not showing any sign of contrition.

"So you claim your retainers acted rashly out of blind loyalty?"

“So it appears. Of course, as I cannot read their minds, this is only speculation on my part.”

I’m impressed. That’s the most refreshingly irresponsible excuse I’ve ever heard.

“So I would ask that you forgive them. I cannot bring myself to punish them, given their injuries.”

“Quite. I would have a hard time punishing them, myself.”

Lady Paulette is extremely angry. She went to the trouble of asking a favor of another House to avoid escalating the situation, and when she returns, some idiot has caused even more damage in her absence.

“Very well, Lord Nuri, we will have you take responsibility in their stead.”

“…Why?! They did this without my permission…”

“You admit you have no control over the soldiers you have brought as your escort. Who is the party vouching for their behavior?”

“…I am, but, the guilty party is…”

As she listens to this ridiculous attempt at a defense, a paladin whispers something to Lady Paulette. The news only serves to further anger her.

“I’m told there was property damage from this incident. You will be paying for that as well.”

“But why?! They acted without permission and failed! And the damage is only for a cheap inn and a lowly tavern!!”

“Everything in House Caputo’s territories is an asset of House Caputo. If your retainers have damaged my assets, then clearly you must pay for that damage.”

Wow. He really thought he could get away with claiming neither he nor his retainers were to blame. When he’s this amazingly disgusting, it’s no longer a laughing matter. This was probably something he got away with in his own country. At the very least, he should have claimed he had no connection with the attackers.

“…As I keep trying to tell you, they’re the ones at fault!”

“Oh? Did you not say you couldn’t stand to see them punished?”

“~~!”

The exiled noble called Nuri is getting dominated in this debate by a woman young enough to be his daughter. With a perfectly sound argument on her side, at that. He’s extremely irate; even a normal person who can’t sense auras could see it just from his expression. Lady Douve’s holding her stomach as she convulses in laughter.

“I will state this before you continue: I have complete jurisdiction over this case. Given that this incident is related to the case at hand, Father will likely support my judgment.”

“…And if he does not?”

“The dangerous ruffians who threatened our lands, by acting in a completely unjustified manner, are hardly innocent refugees. As such, the

moment their treatment is complete, they will be deported. Yourself included."

"How dare you! That's an abuse of your authority! No one will stand for this!"

"It is my call to make. I will brook no interference in this matter, even from the Royal Family."

Oh wow, she's awesome... Lady Paulette's statement is a breath of fresh air.

Of course, she's not saying anything out of the ordinary. If the lord of one of the Four Great Houses has given her complete jurisdiction, then there's nothing even the Royal Family can do to intervene. And besides, they're just dealing with exiled nobles here anyway.

"~~and fundamentally!! It's your fault for not bringing that man to the courtroom! That is why my retainers decided to risk their lives to ensure that he was accountable to the law! How do you plan to deal with that?!"

Given all that he has to hide, no doubt this Nuri tried to liquidate the witness by using his lack of cooperation as an excuse. Unfortunately, his thugs were defeated and now he's getting yelled at. He's doing a very good job of explaining his schemes to those of us who weren't involved in this business to begin with.

"That man you see there is this kingdom's greatest duelist. The Baby-Faced Master Swordsman."

A brat wearing a ratty kimono with a wooden sword in his sash. Wearing sandals, to boot. Looking like this, I can't blame people for treating me like a vagrant. It's certainly underwhelming when introducing me as the kingdom's greatest duelist.

"...Beg pardon. You mean that young lady there?"

"No, that gentleman there."

Lady Paulette clarifies that it's me, rather than Blois, who is standing next to me.

Hearing that, Nuri can't help but snicker. Yeah, can't blame him for thinking I look pitiful. It's a bit late to think this, but I'm still impressed that Lady Douve chose to hire a man like me.

"...My apologies... So he's this kingdom's greatest duelist... How...surprising. So he's the greatest... I never would have imagined such a man to be the greatest."

Oh, I agree with that. I certainly don't look the part.

"I see, he must be quite the famous swordsman... Perhaps he would be able to drag that man into court, after all."

He's certainly mocking me... I didn't know you could be that disrespectful, while maintaining such a façade of civility. Despite the fact that he's an exile, not even the lord of this territory, he's certainly got the arrogance down pat.

"Yes, I have faith that he will."

“I see… Allow me to ask this, then. If he fails, then you will permit us to take the necessary measures?”

“Very well. I cannot think of anyone better suited for this task than him.”

“I see… Then I will have to put my faith in his skill.”

I look over the injured warriors again. All of them have multiple wounds, and it’s clearly not an ordinary set of injuries.

Most of them have defensive wounds; despite the fight having been one swordsman against multiple opponents, the swordsman hit his opponents multiple times. And he still won.

What could that mean…

“Very well, Master Sansui, I leave this in your hands.”

“Yes, it’s up to you, Sansui.”

“As you wish.”

No, no need to think about it. Having information to prepare with is important, but there’s nothing good that comes from letting it trap you. Besides, the opponent knows nothing about me. It doesn’t feel right to have the advantage of knowledge. That little bit of guilt could lead to hesitation.

One more thing… Given that this opponent is a “swordsman,” then I’m looking forward to this meeting.

Part 4 — Fate

The narrative of this incident is rather simple.

Stating the objective facts, two outsiders to these lands, a tourist and an exiled noble, got into a fight. I've heard it took place in so-and-so city, on one of the main streets. The witness testimony made it clear that the fault was with that Nuri fellow. In essence, if it were to be settled in a court of law, the tourist would likely win.

However, the tourist refused to put his trust in that outcome, which is why he refuses to go to court. If the authorities wanted him to testify, they would have to subdue him first. He has no guarantee of a fair judgment by the law, so he prefers to entrust his fate to his sword.

After giving a statement to that effect, he returned to the half-destroyed inn and is still there, sipping tea in the common room.

"I apologize for the delay."

"Ah, the lord's daughter."

The swordsman, a man who looks like he's stepped right out of *1001 Arabian Nights*, is relaxing inside the ruins of the inn. He wears a curved blade on his hip, and he has handsome, dignified features and a dusky face. He wears an extremely relaxed expression, and he doesn't have the air of a man awaiting trial. Seeing the very picture of a handsome foreigner…

"Sansui, avoid doing any permanent damage, alright?"

Lady Douve smiles, pleased with what she sees.

Yes, even from my perspective as a man, this man is quite the catch.

“I’ve enjoyed my time here. There was plenty to do while I waited.”

“My sincere apologies, as it appears there were ruffians attempting to subject you to unjust violence. I will see that they are properly punished in a separate ruling. With such incompetent handling, I can understand your reluctance to trust our kingdom’s laws.”

“Worry not. Mere thugs are no challenge to my blade.”

With that, he stands from his seat near the bar, then turns his gaze to me as I stand near Lady Douve. He looks to be a little older than Lady Douve and a bit younger than His Brothership.

I certainly hope that, by some miracle, he’ll be drawn to Lady Douve, but before that I have to take him down.

“So that fellow is this kingdom’s greatest duelist?”

“Yes. The greatest duelist, as acknowledged by all in this kingdom. The Baby-Faced Master Swordsman, Master Shirokuro Sansui.”

“Mm, I see… The warriors I’ve met in this kingdom wore quite a bit of equipment, but you fight in that outfit?”

“Yes. He doesn’t allow his opponent to so much as touch his clothing.”

Lady Douve was silently beaming. I mean, I guess she can’t help it, having one of her accessories so highly praised by one of her peers. And the tourist looks to be her type, too.

“I see… Very well, then this space is too small. Innkeeper! My thanks for your hospitality!”

The foreign swordsman elegantly makes his way out of the shabby inn and steps past us into the city.

“I have found a perfect clearing in this city. Our blades shall clash there, Master Duelist.”

He evidently feels nothing to be ashamed of. Cool and confident, he strides down the main street.

I suspect that nobleman picked a fight with him stemming from a sense of inferiority. Just ugly jealousy. Even after seeing my attire, he shows no sign of underestimating me. No doubt, when seeing a man with such a handsome face and personality, Nuri felt quite a few reasons for resentment.

“Master Sansui… I ask you to settle this with restraint.”

“I will do all in my power, ma’am.”

I think I might be smiling. Sensing my opponent’s skill as a swordsman, I can’t contain my enthusiasm. It’s not a good thing, but I can’t lie to myself.

I follow him through the street. After a short walk, we arrive at his chosen spot. It is, as he described, a clearing. There are no barriers, and we’re standing in the middle of the city’s central intersection.

“I hear this space is used for public executions. No doubt it will ensure the outcome will be fair and fully evident to even the meanest observer.”

“Agreed.”

House Caputo’s retainers are already clearing a space for us. Of course, the very act of ushering people away draws more onlookers, but at least this way there won’t be any unnecessary collateral damage. The square has plenty of space for two swordsmen to duel.

“I will allow no interruption to this duel. The cause of this problem, after all, was the action taken by a noble under my protection causing a disturbance. I will take all responsibility for it.”

“How wondrous! A remarkable display of hospitality! How about it, oh lady of this land? Join me in my bedchambers once this battle is over? I enjoy the company of smart women.”

“I will have to decline. Instead, may I suggest focusing on the opponent before you?”

“Oh, I’m already focused upon him.”

The obviously dashing swordsman draws his blade from his hip. Dropping into a stance with his one-handed sword, he points the blade in my direction. Despite hitting on Lady Paulette, he hasn’t taken his eyes off of me.

“There was no man equal to my skill with the blade in my homeland. If I defeat the man before me, I shall be peerless in this kingdom as well! There is no way I can take this duel lightly!”

He’s got a turban wrapped around his head, but he’s not wearing any greaves, nor a helmet. To claim to be peerless in that setup, he must have quite a bit of skill.

At the very least, he’s better than Blois. Putting Saiga aside, he’s the only the second opponent of this caliber that I’ve faced.

“Then let us begin! My name is Tahlan! The Lone Swordsman Tahlan!”

“Sansui Shirokuro. Bodyguard to Lady Douve of House Sepaeda.”

I drop into a stance with my wooden sword. We’re both armed with weapons more than capable of killing our opponent. Blois and Lain have already moved back to join Lady Douve and Lady Paulette. The distance between us is a touch wider than a single sword strike can bridge. But that’s only by the logic of swordplay. I have no doubt the man in front of me is a wielder of a Rare Art.

“Very well, then, Sansui! First, defend yourself against my blade!”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

I get to witness a style that was developed in a foreign land. That’s a very exciting opportunity.

I enter a middle stance and wait. In swordplay, the distance between yourself and the opponent is generally judged as the distance between your blade and theirs. Just as boxers measure the distance with their opponent by trading jabs, swordsmen will move the tips of their blades to avoid giving their opponent that information.

Judging distance... That’s extremely important in swordplay. There are even specific techniques for making your opponent misjudge the distance.

Of course, such techniques aren't very useful on the battlefield. You're likely to take a sword to your back before you can figure out the distance.

Essentially, it's part of the special joy only available in a one-on-one duel.

"Heh…"

Tahlan shifts from his fencing stance, with his right foot and right hand in front, pulling his right foot back and thus moving into a tall guard stance.

He's also lowered his gaze a bit. Is he counting the bricks underfoot? Since the street is paved with bricks, counting them could give him an accurate sense of the distance. How does he plan to move with his left shoulder and foot up front and his right hand and blade hidden from view?

While I have a decent grasp of his intentions, I refrain from saying so out loud.

I still wonder why I mentioned to Saiga that I knew he could use multiple Arts before our second duel. That must have annoyed him and made him dig in on his position. Did I simply want to show off my superiority and make myself look bigger in comparison?

In one sense, that's the right approach to a fight, but I feel it's against the etiquette of dueling. At the very least, I wanted to avoid disrespecting the opponent in front of me.

"Now, shall we see who really deserves the appellation of the greatest duelist?"

Part 5 — Ultimate Technique

People who are the most vocal about fairness or equality tend to favor themselves most over other people.

That was true of Nuri, as well. In his eyes, it was natural that he and his desires should take priority over other concerns, and rather than bother with the niceties of the law, a mere tourist should be promptly restrained and humiliated with the power of the state.

At least, that was how it was for him in his homeland, and that is how he thinks it should be in this kingdom. Of course, he recognizes, at least on paper, that this is not his own territory. Yet since he's unaware of any other way of living, he couldn't stand having his wishes disregarded.

"Hehehe... He's finished this time, for sure."

Nuri, too, was watching the duel with his retinue. However, he's not just standing there watching. To him, the important thing is the outcome.

The man named Tahlan is wearing no armor, and the brat's wooden sword should be sufficient to harm him. All that remains is to quietly dispose of him after his arrest, by either bribing the doctor treating him, or the guard watching over him. Or so Nuri hoped.

Nuri also found himself hoping that the pitiful-looking brat would just kill him.

But he was still weighing what to do in the case of failure. Or rather, that was his primary line of thought.

There was no way such a brat could best an opponent who thoroughly had defeated his own minions. It was natural that he'd lose, and he needed to lose.

However the battle progressed, so long as Tahlan won, he would take a moment to celebrate a worthy victory in front of the masses. The moment he lets down his guard to celebrate, a sniper positioned by his capable subordinate will shoot Tahlan with a crossbow. And with that, the disrespectful outsider would die.

It was a rational, efficient plan. It should have allowed him to obtain the result he so desired: to kill Tahlan.

"Tch, damned savage Rare Arts user..."

He didn't want to admit it, but Tahlan was strong. He didn't realize that Tahlan could use "magic," but even if he had known, his minions still wouldn't have been able to defeat Tahlan. And Tahlan was certainly too much for any single swordsman to handle...

"To think I would live to see that technique used..."

Tahlan was born with the greatest talents, given the best training, and with the greatest effort, had managed to learn a technique considered mythical at the tender age of 22. The technique was described in an ancient text — and only three individuals had been able to master it throughout recorded history. The technique was developed with the use of a Rare Art as

a prerequisite, and it was an extremely difficult technique, requiring mastery of both that Art and the use of the sword.

It was natural that Tahlan, having mastered that technique, would seek out opponents beyond his homeland to test his strength and thus find an enemy worthy of his technique.

An opponent who can't be defeated by that technique is beyond mortal understanding, in Tahlan's mind. Tahlan has absolute confidence in the technique, but he has yet to find an opportunity to use it. There weren't many opponents that a master swordsman wielding a Rare Art couldn't defeat with ordinary tactics.

If you desire my presence in court, first defeat my blade. That demand must have been at least partly driven by a desire to find an opponent worthy of his technique.

"Ah, the world is so much bigger than I imagined..." Tahlan laughs. He's finally found them. An opponent who could defeat him in ordinary combat. A master swordsman worthy of his ultimate technique.

To think that it would be a young man who seemed younger than he was...

"Ultimate Technique—"

He carefully measures the distance to the unmoving young man as he prepares to unleash the magic and the sword technique all at once.

"Sword Dance of Shadows!"

Tahlan's technique draws the eyes of all of the onlookers.

Having previously stood unmoving in a tall guard, Tahlan's body suddenly blurs. A moment later, multiple Tahlans spring to life and attack.

The Rare Art, "Shadow Summoning." An Art that creates and controls duplicates of the wielder. The ability to create multiple versions of yourself sounds convenient, but it is, in fact, a difficult Art to use well.

First, the duplicates are perfect copies of the caster, which means any injuries and illnesses carried are reflected in the duplicates, and their speed and strength are not enhanced. If the wielder is not himself a powerful warrior, the only result would be increasing the number of amateurs on the battlefield. In that case, it's a tool of surprise at best.

However, if wielded by a skilled swordsman, you have multiple master swordsmen attacking at once, making it a nearly unmatched technique for close combat.

There are ten of my shadows out there. How will you respond?

The most dangerous element of Shadow Summoning is that, while the original's injuries are reflected in the shadows, nothing that happens to the shadows will affect the original. In effect, the wielder can commit to multiple suicidal attacks at no risk to themselves.

Further, while the shadows will vanish after taking a certain amount of damage, they can handle at least as much punishment as an individual person. Which means that, if unleashed to the fore, they can become a

human wall to defend the wielder. Even if the shadows are all destroyed using wind or fire magic, Tahlan himself would remain untouched.

“How swift!”

Blois, watching from a distance, finds herself admiring the movement of each shadow purely as a swordswoman.

A shadow unleashes a leaping slash, another shadow executes a charging lunge, and yet another attempts to circle around and slash at Sansui’s flank. Each attack with exquisite skill.

Blois wasn’t the only one taken in by the display. All of the onlookers watch enraptured as the foreigner’s Rare Art creates more and more shadows.

None were watching Sansui as the ten shadows swallowed him.

Within that group of shadows, Sansui steps forward.

It would be one thing to use Flash Step, but if I simply fall back, he would hit me. If I try to escape to the side, I’ll be flanked. And there’s no way to defend from all the simultaneous blows if I stay unmoving.

There is a shadow a bit beyond where Sansui had been standing, while several shadows attempt to flank and surround him. Despite being unleashed from the front, the shadows have cut off any potential routes of retreat.

This is why Sansui moves forward as he avoids the attacks from the shadows.

An envelopment of blades using shadows. But a master swordsman can surely notice the hole in the formation.

Yes, against this ultimate dance of shadows, the only way to go is forward.

The ultimate technique where, if you respond to the shadows with your sword, the remaining shadows will attack from all sides while you’re busy. The only way to avoid the blade storm from the shadows is to avoid them while moving forward.

The gap a master can see... Is already obvious for the wielder as well!

When facing this ultimate technique, the only correct response is to move forward toward the gap. And for the wielder of the technique, they will know when the opponent will emerge through that gap.

There is no escape if the attack comes at that moment.

Tahlan grips his sword, lashing out with a slash as Sansui emerges.

While deeply impressed by the fact that Sansui has emerged from the mass of shadows without a scratch, he unleashes his blow regardless, placing his entire body weight behind it to allow no counterattack or defense, entirely confident of victory.

Switching his grip from one-handed to two-handed, he aggressively steps in and strikes down at Sansui.

Combining precise control of his shadows with his own sword play at the end. A maneuver worthy of being called an ultimate technique...

Sansui looked upon the attacking Tahlan with admiration. It was, in short, the perfect attack, seemingly unbeatable with sword alone.

He had emerged unscathed from the mass of shadows, but he was still in an untenable position. With his current stance, he could neither defend or evade.

Sansui couldn't help but respect Tahlan and his forebearers deeply. Men who, like his own Master, had combined their arts with swordplay and obtained mastery in both.

Simultaneously, Tahlan, who finally could show off his ultimate technique, couldn't contain his surprise.

Not at the stupendous skill of his opponent, who had somehow avoided the combined attacks of his shadows.

No, it was that, after emerging from the storm of swords, a storm that could only result in defeat if he attempted to counter it, there was no sign of the wooden sword that should have been in Sansui's hand or at his hip.

He couldn't understand the meaning behind what he saw.

Where is his weapon?!

The answer landed on Tahlan's head as he drew back to strike.

Sansui had thrown the wooden sword upward and to the front as the shadows surrounded him. The wooden stick landed on Tahlan's head with a soft thud.

"Wha...?!"

Had Sansui thrown the sword like a javelin, given the close range, a blow to the head could have been lethal. But the wooden sword had been thrown lightly, in a looping arc. Had it been a steel sword, the weight and edge could have resulted in injury, but there was no hope of that with a wooden sword. The most it could accomplish was to surprise Tahlan as he prepared to strike.

That moment of hesitation was the pebble Sansui needed to disrupt the precise machinery of Tahlan's ultimate technique.

"I apologize for the breach in etiquette..."

A strike with everything behind it. As Tahlan stands, only needing to complete his swing, the brief hesitation gives Sansui the opening he needs to crouch and leap forward.

As he leaps forward with all his strength, his foot makes an impact. At that point, it makes no difference what he may be carrying in his hand. That is, he just sweeps Tahlan and tosses him into the air.

"But if you could accept this result..."

Tahlan falls to the brick-paved street, unable to even break his own fall. As he lays on his back, he finds the tips of the wooden blade and of his own sword at his throat.

"Well done..."

"Yes, that was remarkable!"

"Go~~, Papa!"

The duel had ended only with a bit of dirt on Tahlan's clothing and no further harm otherwise. It was the result that the two noblewomen had hoped to see. Leaving Tahlan to his shock, his employer, his colleague, and his daughter approached Sansui, as usual.

Simultaneously, those displeased with the result could only stare in shock.

"What was that?!"

What did Nuri see from his vantage point? He saw Tahlan unleash multiple shadows, only to be tripped and restrained in the blink of an eye. Worst for him, Tahlan lay on the ground with hardly a scratch on him. And yet, his minions haven't bothered to fire.

"Wait, why is nothing happening?!"

To think they'd gone through the trouble of finding ideal spots to place snipers and positioned crossbowmen in wait... Why are his underlings doing nothing?

As Nuri's irritation builds, the paladins of House Caputo approach from behind, in a line.

"A pity, Lord Nuri."

"—Wha?!"

"This city is our jurisdiction. That square is often used for events and celebrations. We, more than you, are well aware of the best vantage points for snipers."

"B-But..."

Having watched from beneath the shadows of a building, Nuri was at a loss about to convince the knight behind him of his innocence. It wasn't his fault. That was the truth. He could not possibly be punished. That, too, was the truth.

But reality has betrayed those truths. His minions have likely all been arrested. While they won't give up who gave them their orders, it's obvious they are his retainers.

"—There's a reason for this! Fetch Lady Paulette! Get her now!"

"Not to worry, my lord. We will be starting the trial in earnest shortly. If you wish to make a statement, please make it there."

"—How dare you! Why should I bother with such trifles?!"

"Oh? I believe you were the one who stated that the only reason one would not testify is because they have something to hide. Is that not so?"

It isn't as though Nuri has never attended a trial. But those were trials in which he knew he would win. Those are what trials are supposed to be like! Why is he being victimized like this?! There's no reason for him to attend a trial that he could lose!

"I believe your argument was in response to his claims that he had nothing to be ashamed of, and thus had no need to appear in court, was it not?"

"How dare you compare me to a man like that!"

“That is not for me to decide, but rather for Lady Paulette. Understand, Lord Nuri, these are not your lands.”

As the very picture of a failed noble is hauled off in chains without anyone knowing, Tahlan, regaining his awareness, kneels respectfully in front of Sansui.

“You win, sir.”

“Your technique was remarkable.”

“...If you could bring yourself to enlighten a wretch like myself... How were you able to so easily defeat my ultimate technique?”

He understood the reasoning behind it. The technique was predicated on precisely cornering the opponent, and landing the attack without providing an opportunity for them to regain their footing.

By that reasoning, Tahlan must always attack at precisely the correct moment, and if faced with an attack like a stone throw, or rather a sword throw, there was no opportunity for Tahlan to avoid it. He understood that Sansui’s attack took advantage of that precision. He simply couldn’t understand how Sansui was able to come up with that counter so quickly.

“...First, the shadows. There are only two ways to use that technique. To surround the opponent and attack at once, or to hold off and deploy them as a feint to force your opponent into your killing blow. It will always end up as one of those two possibilities.”

The importance was that it had gone from a one-on-one duel to mass combat, and when facing a single opponent with a group, the only options are to strike at once, or hold off on attacking and corner the opponent. If you can read the timing of the shadows and their strikes, it’s easy to determine which type of attack is coming.

“Your shadows did not attack all at once, but came in a few groups. As such, I could guess that they were there to cut off my routes of retreat and move me in a particular direction. At that point, I was able to guess where the shadows were trying to move me, and throw my sword in that direction. The sheer quantity of your shadows helped hide my movements.”

“You were able to make that determination in that single moment?”

“No, not at all. I had the benefit of advance knowledge, I’m afraid. You fought against the minions of a man named Nuri, did you not? All of them had multiple wounds on them. That means you landed multiple sequential blows against each of them...or that you managed to throw multiple attacks at them all at once, like with wind magic. But you were carefully measuring the distance between us. That told me you were not going to use an indiscriminate ranged attack.”

Wind magic has an effective distance, but it’s still greater than your typical bow. At the very least, it wasn’t a factor to consider at that distance. Of course, given that there were spectators, there was no need to watch for it.

“Further, if you were to fight multiple opponents, if you exchanged a series of blows with multiple enemies, there would be no way you could

avoid injury yourself. Nor did it seem you were protecting yourself with the Mystic Arts. After all, you wouldn't have to carefully measure out the distance between you and your opponent in such a case, and if you were capable of rapid movement, you wouldn't need to exchange blows with your opponents. That left me with two possibilities: either you increased the number of strikes you could bring to bear or you increased your own numbers."

"Which means you had some sense of the mechanics of my Shadow Summoning."

"Yes. I have a technique that allows for rapid movement, so it was easy enough to consider. As such, I sought to minimize my use of non-sword Arts, and stick to swordplay."

If Sansui had used his Flash Step, he could have simply retreated and avoided the attacks from the shadows. Sansui chose, instead, to play by his opponent's rules, because he wanted to respond with the sword as much as possible.

"Those shadows... They're neither controlled remotely, nor can they act on their own. They're pre-programmed…that is, you need to determine their actions ahead of time. Yet their precision was remarkable. To create a pattern of movement, including feints, up to your final strike... It was both masterful and entirely in accordance with the laws of swordplay. A remarkable display of skill. No doubt you have spent countless hours studying."

"…Yet I bow before your mastery."

Having lost as a swordsman to the man before him, Tahlan remains kneeling in respect, his eyes glittering with earnest hope.

"By my honor, I shall accept any punishment meted out to me. However…once my sentence is done, if I am fortunate enough to still draw breath, would you do me the honor of making me your apprentice?"

Part 6 — Arrest

“I’m afraid that I’m not yet considered fully trained by my Master, and so I am not in a position to take apprentices.”

To have an opponent I bested ask to become my apprentice... It’s rare, but it’s not like it hasn’t happened before, over the last five years. Each time, however, I have always declined, regardless of who asked, and always for the same reason. Knowing my Master, it felt pretentious for someone as immature as I was to even think of having an apprentice. I need to at least catch up to where my Master was five hundred years ago in order to take an apprentice of my own.

Sure, my Master said it was fine for me to take on the title of the greatest duelist in the mortal world, but I’m not yet fully formed as a swordsman.

To think, it’s harder to be considered a fully formed Immortal rather than the greatest duelist... Training for an Immortal really is unending.

“Hrm... In that case, please introduce me to your Master! I feel that I’ve caught but a glimpse of the true path of the sword!”

“That’s confidential information, so...”

“Sansui!” Lady Douve yells right into my ear. I can feel my ears ringing. She’s extremely displeased. I can guess why, of course. It’s because I said no.

“It’s a good excuse to take this man into my estate!”

“Lady Douve, in that case, you would be marrying my apprentice. Do you find that acceptable?”

“Even the Royal Family has instructors!”

Well, I suppose that’s true, but I still don’t want to be any part of her scheming. Unlike Saiga, he’s truly a first-rate warrior. No doubt he could have given the Grand Commander of the Royal Guard, who I had fought some time ago, a good match. There was nothing wrong with his technique, and I just couldn’t think of any reason for me to train him.

“Lady Douve, I’m still a fledgling, and have my hands full just with raising Lain.”

“You’re five hundred years old! Don’t be ridiculous!”

“L-Lady Douve?! Please keep your voice down.”

Lady Douve is yelling, clearly enraged. Doesn’t seem like anyone’s taken it seriously, but it’s not something she should be shouting out in the city square. Blois steps in to try to stop her, to no avail. I mean, sure, Tahlan is certainly a catch. At least, I’d think so if I were a woman.

“Perhaps we can discuss the matter of apprenticeship another time. I do hate to bother you, but...”

“Yes, of course. It’s only right that I accept my punishment from the law. Very well, lead on, oh lady of the land.”

Tahlan follows behind Lady Paulette calmly, with no need for restraints. Several of her paladins follow behind them. Meanwhile, several of the

paladins have arrested Nuri and his minions. Even if they were completely blameless in the previous hostilities, their attempt to assassinate Tahlan has more than ruined any chance of forgiveness.

"Tsk...you really are stubborn. All you had to do was say yes."

"Lady Douve, that would be presumptuous. For someone who is still so far from being truly accomplished, to train someone else...it is the height of presumption."

"Sigh...I'm losing my desire to marry you."

Yay! Those words make me so happy! Thank you so much, Lady Douve.

Still, I understand what she wants to say. Even if I'm still a novice by Immortal standards, and despite being nowhere close to my Master in skill with a sword, from a mortal perspective, my arguments are ridiculous.

If someone was still a fledgling after five hundred years of practice, then no one would ever have the right to teach anyone else. But still, it's true in my case.

"Very well, then let's head to the courthouse. Lain, you'll have to stay here, so wait outside with Blois."

"...Are you certain, Lady Douve?"

"Yes, Blois. You plan to become Lain's mother, yes? Then spend some time playing with her."

"L-Lady Douve!"

"I'm kidding... In all honesty, I need to teach Sansui to properly escort me in formal settings. At least, thinking ahead into the future."

As part of Lady Douve's last resort, to marry me if necessary... Well, that's not all of it. All four of the Great Houses have an ace of their own, and I'm the most famous and most harmless of all of them. She might have no choice but to have me accompany her everywhere as her escort.

"Paulette isn't going to take any half-measures this time. She may hand down punishments that children shouldn't see."

"I would prefer not to see punishments unsuitable for children, either, Lady Douve."

"Well, I want to see them. And besides, does that mean you'd be fine with Blois witnessing such things?"

I would think the ideal solution would be for you to restrain your urge to watch the punishments, but I suppose that's not an option. Very well. In all fairness, it's generally best for a bodyguard not to demand changes in itinerary. And it's someone who asked to become my apprentice. The least I can do is witness his trial.

"Very well, Lady Douve. Lain, go with Blois and try to behave yourself, alright?"

"Yup! Okay!"

I can't quite hold back a bit of unease as we split up in the reverse of the usual arrangement.

Blois is strong, but she's not overpowered in a broken way like Saiga or I. In fact, she might be a rank below Tahlan, which means she might not be

able to deal with an unexpected development. Still, there's no end to that if I started worrying about that. No, I should trust her with my daughter, especially if she may become my wife.

"Say, Auntie Blois?"

"What is it, Lain?"

"Are you going to become my Mama, Auntie Blois?"

"T-That might happen, yes."

Lady Douve interjects, "You might end up my husband, so you should at least spare a thought or two for me. Are you that worried about your daughter?"

"Y-Yes. I still get uneasy when she's too far away."

Marrying Lady Douve... I really don't want to do that. I would definitely prefer to marry Blois instead...

Part 7 — Ritual

“Lord Nuri. Your retainers were caught aiming their weapons at Master Sansui and Master Tahlan during their duel. Further, you held yourself at a distance from the crowd. Have you anything to say in your defense?”

“I-I have done nothing wrong! I had my retainers on hand in case th-that man Tahlan tried anything untoward against this kingdom’s greatest duelist!”

“Very well, then I shall take you at your word.”

That’s not true at all. Her eyes clearly show she’s not buying it.

We’re in a room that doesn’t look anything like a place to hold a trial. No, it’s a small windowless space, perhaps better described as a confinement chamber.

In this room sit Lady Douve and I, along with the parties of this dispute, Tahlan and Nuri, and finally Lady Paulette and an overtly shady-looking man. He’s wearing a heavy black robe that covers him from head to toe, making it impossible to see his face. With the small room only dimly lit with a handful of candles, the whole setup is clearly designed to leave the accused parties with a feeling of unease.

This is clearly not a trial. I mean, Lady Douve’s even smirking.

“However, I consider this case to be an extremely grave situation. While it is fortunate that no one was killed, an exiled noble and a visitor to our lands, Lord Nuri and Master Tahlan, have engaged in serious conflict within our territory. As a result, there is a sense of panic spreading among my subjects. I will do everything I can to reassure them that they are safe.”

Unlike Lady Douve or Happine, who simply indulge their whims, Lady Paulette speaks with a clear sense of responsibility. She’s definitely the ideal image of nobility. I think Lady Douve shouldn’t just be friends with her, but also admire her, and maybe even strive to emulate her. I mean, I’ve managed to enjoy life thanks to having my Master to look up to, after all.

“Regardless of the facts, you have frightened my subjects. And such fear may lead to them developing a suspicion of people who come from outside our lands. To prevent such an outcome, we will conduct a strict trial concerning this matter.”

“You mention a trial, but...you intend to hold it here? Who are the judges?”

“Rest assured, this trial will be held according to the laws of our kingdom, in a perfectly legal and time-tested format.”

There’s absolutely nothing reassuring in that for Nuri. Of course, he’s got nothing going for him here. There are no jurors, judges, or lawyers he can bribe. He may end up facing mob justice.

“Now, given that you hail from a foreign land, how much do you know of the Rare Arts of our kingdom, Master Tahlan?”

“Not much at all. Indeed, my kingdom doesn’t have much in the way of magic techniques itself. I was rather surprised to see that man’s underlings manipulating wind and fire.”

Treating a noble’s house soldiers as mere underlings. Fighting words there by themselves. At the very least, they were enough to clearly anger Nuri.

“But I understand what you’re talking about. Special abilities that only those with the specific talent for them can use. That is what you call a Rare Art, yes? My Shadow Summoning is counted among them.”

“That is correct. In our kingdom there are primarily two Rare Arts of note. Or rather, this kingdom and the surrounding lands.”

When it comes to those two, even I know what they are. The Mystic Arts, which Paulette Caputo and her House can use. And the other, the Hex Arts that are passed down through the bloodline of Saiga’s harem member, Zuger Saive.

“One is the Art of healing and protection, the Mystic Arts. My House is more likely than others to produce those with a talent for it. The other, the feared art, the forbidden art... That is, Hex Arts.”

“Allow me to introduce myself.” The suspiciously robed man speaks. He has a cool look to him, one going beyond calm into an almost inhuman coldness. He doesn’t look much older than Tahlan, but he gives off a completely different aura. He feels like an embodiment of darkness, giving off an unnatural air identical to Zuger’s.

“I am Douverb Saive. A Hex Artist.”

“Wha?! A H-Hex Artist?!”

Nuri reacts with a burst of panic, simultaneously feeling both terror and outrage.

Seeing his reaction, Tahlan, while calm, seems to understand just how dangerous a Hex Artist is. Still, he retains his calm expression. I suppose it means he’s already come to terms with any outcome. That, or he truly has nothing to be ashamed of.

“I see. You appear to be greatly feared. The trial we are about to undergo will involve a test of nerve, then?”

“You aren’t mistaken. We will be using my hex magic to discern between truth and lies.”

“Wh-What is the meaning of this?! To bring a hex caster into a trial?! There are no limits to your impudence!”

Douverb Saive. Based on his name, he must be related to Zuger Saive. No doubt it’s partly because he’s playing it up, but he’s exactly what I would imagine a hex caster to be like.

“To answer your concerns, I am empowered to conduct trials in this kingdom. I do not have the right to convene a trial, but the Royal Family and the Four Great Houses have the legal authority to request our aid in conducting legal proceedings.”

“B-But, even then! You realize what you are saying by calling upon a hex caster?!”

“I do. I do not trust you.”

There’s no basis for her to trust him. He’s dug so many graves that there are far too many to choose from. There was nothing wrong with calling on an undertaker to help with the process.

“Very well. I shall explain the format of this ‘trial,’ so as to alleviate any concerns regarding legitimacy or fairness.”

Douverb slides his sleeve up, revealing pale skin. Rather than stopping at the bicep, he continues rolling up the sleeve, exposing his arm up to the shoulder.

“From here, the two interested parties, that is, Lord Nuri and Master Tahlan; the convening noble Lady Paulette; and I, the executor; will temporarily petrify our right arms.”

He starts with a terrifying statement. I mean, to start out by baldly explaining that he’ll turn a body part to stone on four people present is extremely concerning. Even Tahlan is at a loss for words. There was no sign that this was either a joke or impossibility.

“Once that is finished, each will take questions from the other three, in order. After briefly explaining their answers, they will then offer a final answer to the question in either the affirmative or negative. If the answer is false, then the petrification will become permanent.”

“...What are you saying? I’m afraid you’ll have to explain it a bit more simply for me.”

“Very well, Master Tahlan. Let us suppose you ask me, ‘Have you any intention of corrupting the outcome of this trial?’ I answer that I have no intention of doing so, and answer in the negative. If there is no deception, then the petrification upon my arm, from my right shoulder to my right elbow, will disappear. On the other hand, if I am indeed deceiving you, my right arm will become permanently petrified, from my right shoulder to my right elbow.”

He’s explaining it calmly, but this is a remarkable claim. I didn’t know the Hex Arts could function like a lie detector. No wonder they’re so feared.

“With our arms petrified, the four of us will ask each other questions about the legitimacy of the trial and details of the incident. Of course, if all present answer truthfully, all will have their petrification removed.”

“I see… So, for testimony given in this space, it must be a truthful statement, and the truth is enforced by the power of your hex magic.”

“That is correct. However, for example, let us say someone claims they indulged in too much ale and could not remember the details, or that they have forgotten the details because it was too far in the past… Such answers will also be accepted as truth, so long as they have no deceptive intent behind them. Further, questions that cannot be answered in the affirmative or negative will be treated as invalid, and the petrification will be canceled.”

“Ah, I see. That’s easy enough to grasp. So there is no issue if you have nothing to hide, and even if you have been lying up until this point, there is a chance for you to correct the record.”

Color continues to drain from Nuri’s face. Well that’s understandable. No one would be thrilled with having their arm turned to stone. That’s particularly true if they’re aware that they’ve been lying.

“You insolent bitch! How dare you insult me in this way?!” Nuri flips from terror and despair to anger.

With his features still pale, he makes his way toward Lady Paulette, stopping just short of attacking her.

“I, Nuri, swear upon the purity of my blood that I will tell no lies, even without the presence of this cursed wretch! I demand an ordinary, cultured, and fair trial!”

“This is a necessary measure. Particularly for you.” Lady Paulette coolly dismisses his concerns. There is no mercy in her expression.

“A noble exile caused a disturbance. The mere rumor of such an incident has the possibility to spread damaging rumors concerning all the exiles. Even if we were to conduct a strict public trial.”

“S-So what?! The mutterings of the common rabble would eventually pass!”

“However, there is a way to eliminate any such concerns. A formal trial by ritual ordeal, one involving a hex caster. That will provide the evidence necessary for the common people to believe the outcome. It will help prove your innocence.”

“…You have no concerns that hex caster won’t manipulate the outcome with his magic?!”

“If that is your concern, you may ask him as much. You have the right to ask him a question yourself. Allow me to warn you, however: if you refuse to participate in this trial, I will turn over every exiled noble in my territories to the new regime in your homeland.”

Nuri’s pale expression becomes more and more pained as his avenues of escape are closed off.

“This trial is being convened according to the laws of the kingdom. To refuse to participate means that you accept a negative verdict. All of your rights and privileges will be stripped, and such punishment will be applied to your entire family line.”

“This is an abuse of authority… Such an outrage won’t be permitted…”

“Understand that this is a stain on my honor as well. It is tantamount to an admission that I lack the ability to properly resolve the situation. But circumstances are sufficiently dire that I am willing to use brute force to settle the matter.”

This is a last resort, and one that no powerful party in a country would opt to take unless absolutely necessary. Holding this trial is as good as a direct statement that you intend to make an enemy of the suspect’s entire family. Even the Four Great Houses and the Royal Family can’t afford to

take such measures casually. The fact that she so decisively committed to this course of action is her way of stating that the exiled nobles are no threat to her.

“Very well. If you are willing to participate in the trial ritual, place your right hand over mine.”

“Then I shall go first.”

“Hah, how interesting. I like that it doesn’t take much time.”

The three of them place their right hands together, as though forming a scrum for a rugby match, clearly conveying that they have nothing to fear and nothing to be ashamed of.

Next to the three young participants, who continue without a fuss, Nuri, the one in the room who’s old enough to have grandchildren, can’t hide his panic. He backs away toward the wall, fear seizing his features. He’s trying to get as much distance as he can, looking for some way out.

“No…No, no, no, nooooo! Why me?! WHY SHOULD I SUFFER LIKE THIS?!”

“If you do not plan to cooperate, we will immediately turn you over to the neighboring authorities. Their government has repeatedly demanded that we hand you over as it is.”

“Do you say that, knowing what those upstarts will do to us when they get their hands on us?!”

“All you must do is cooperate and state the truth. That will solve any potential problem.”

Perfectly aware of her own safety, Lady Douve mockingly snickers at Nuri’s disgraceful squirming. His kind brought upon their own overthrow, and as such brought upon their own exile. Given the degree of that miserable failure, her mockery was rather cruel. Yeah, I would really rather not marry someone like her.

In the end, Nuri wound up cooperating, and fully admitted his guilt. After begging for his life, the punishment wound up being a rather straightforward confiscation of all of his assets.

“Ah, such a relief to have all my limbs working again!”

Opening his right hand, the one that had been stone just a few moments prior, Tahlan stretches out his fingers happily.

Maintaining his composure when his right arm was turned to stone, and at risk of staying that way, was pretty gutsy. He’s fearless, but it might just be that Lady Paulette’s earnestness also resonated with him.

“Master Hex Caster, your technique was also flawless. No wonder you are feared and respected in this kingdom.”

“It is our family’s role. A necessary evil.”

The parties involved in the trial, other than Nuri, are assembled here at the House Caputo estate. All of them were filled with joy at having resolved the current crisis. That, or they’re satisfied with having seen Nuri openly humiliate himself.

As part of a low-key celebration, everyone involved was enjoying some mildly alcoholic drinks. Lain, of course, is restricted to soft drinks. As for me, I'm not drinking anything, but I'm a bodyguard, and I'm also an Immortal.

"…I would like to take this opportunity to offer my sincere apologies, Lady Paulette. It appears my private dispute caused you no end of trouble."

"Please do not trouble yourself. While you may not be blameless, Lord Nuri was the party who started it. That is something he himself admitted to."

The cause of the matter was simple enough. Seeing his dark skin, Nuri noticed Tahlan was a foreigner, and picked a fight with him. He was hoping to blow off steam by indulging in some bigotry, only to end up taunting a warrior like Tahlan, who wouldn't stand for the insult, and wound up being driven off without Tahlan even having to use any magic.

Tahlan could have prevented the escalation by backing down, but it was an insult to his honor he simply couldn't accept. That's a sign of his youth, I suppose. Still, it seems to have left a good impression on Lady Douve.

"If anything, it is my responsibility for indulging them for so long. Please don't concern yourself with the outcome."

"I appreciate your gracious words. Now… Master Sansui, I would like to once again ask for your instruction. If you cannot grant me that, I ask for an introduction to your Master."

"You know what you must do, right, Sansui?"

Lady Douve directs a look in my direction. It's hard to say whether it's one of fervent urging or a coldly calculated threat. However, I honestly don't know what it is I can teach him.

"But Lady Douve, as you may be aware, I do not know how I could be of any help to him…"

"Oh, never mind that!"

But, that's kind of the whole point, isn't it? I feel like Lady Douve should probably at least try to play at being a little coy in front of him. Wanting to provide him an honest answer, I turn to face Tahlan directly.

"If you believe there is something lacking in your blade, perhaps you ought to return to your homeland and ask for further instruction from your master?"

"After I attained the ultimate technique, my master informed me he had nothing more to teach me."

That's a statement that must have been both gratifying and harsh at the same time. I probably wouldn't know how to react if told that, either. No doubt I would wander the world, looking for another person to look up to.

"My name is Magyan Tahlan! In these lands, I witnessed a new height in the way of the blade, one I had been seeking in my travels! I beg you, honor me with your wisdom!"

“…Hold on just a moment.”

As the dashing, dusky-skinned swordsman states his full name, Lady Douve seeks confirmation despite her shock.

“Do you have a relative named Magyan Sunae?”

“She is my younger sister.”

Lady Douve’s expression at those words was, in a sense, quite a riot. The sort of face you might make when you found that your favorite doll had mold growing on it when you flipped it over.

“Magyan Sunae… Ah, I see.”

The connection has meaning for Douverb Saive, as well. That’s to be expected, since both the hex caster and the swordsman have younger sisters engaged to Saiga.

“Truly?! My sister is betrothed to a countryman of Master Sansui?! Impossible!” Tahlan exclaims in surprise, losing his typical unflappable cool.

Indeed, the name has left even Lady Paulette in shock. Understandable, given the man she thought a mere tourist was foreign royalty. She had even turned the prince’s arm to stone.

“If you are Magyan Sunae’s older brother… That would mean you are a Prince, yes?! Forgive my disrespect. It may have been in ignorance, but…”

“Worry not, Lady Paulette. As you may be aware from your acquaintance with Sunae, my lack of the Royal Presence means I have no right to the crown.”

To ‘fail’ in a bloodline… It’s an unavoidable fate for clans like Saive and Caputo, where the Rare Arts run in the family.

Not all members of a hex casting bloodline will have the talent for hex magic, and may indeed be born with a different talent entirely. If such an individual has a child, there is no guarantee that they will have the talent for hex casting, either. As such, to protect the family bloodline, these children lose their right to inherit leadership of the family.

In that sense, Tahlan would be a failure, from the perspective of either Douverb or Lady Paulette.

“However, my sister has the Royal Presence and is in the line of succession, so for her to marry so casually… Is her chosen man a fellow of certain ability?”

“Yes…he has been accepted as the son-in-law to another of the Great Houses, equal in stature to my house and Douve’s, House Batterabbe. Further, he is a remarkable wielder of the Mystic Arts, and had never lost until his duels with Master Sansui. I have heard he even wields the Sacred Sword Eckesachs.”

“The wielder of the Sacred Sword Eckesachs, holder of my sister’s heart… How exciting…”

As the others recover from their disorientation, Lady Douve remains in shock.

Just as she finally found a man worthy of herself, it turns out he's related to a woman who is an equal to Happine, someone she always considered her inferior — meaning she would end up distantly related to Happine, if they were to marry.

"Master Douverb Saive's younger sister, Zuger Saive, is also engaged to your sister's betrothed, Mizu Saiga."

"Ah, so we are to become kin, then, Master Hex Caster?"

It was a conversation that drove home just how impressive a harem-type protagonist could be. He's not even here, yet Saiga's presence was still palpable.

"As a family, we have cut ties with my sister. She is unable to fulfill her role as a hex caster."

"Ah, that is rather harsh. Still, given that the role includes, at times, serving as an executioner, I can understand that there will be those who are and aren't suited to the role. That is, perhaps, inevitable."

Being unsuited to a role, not for a lack of talent, but because she lacks the personality to be an effective hex caster. I suppose that is a question of character. No doubt it's impossible to fulfill the role hex casters fill in this kingdom if they're not able to commit to their profession. It's understandable. To turn your arm to stone for each task, and end up feared and hated by all… It's not a pleasant role.

"However, if my sister is close by and she has gotten betrothed without permission, then I have a responsibility to speak to her. She's clearly lacking in a sense of responsibility as one with the Royal Presence. Could you tell me where I may find my sister and her betrothed?"

"In that case, they are at the Arcana Royal Academy, where Douve will be returning shortly. Perhaps you could join them?"

Lady Paulette's advice might just be a little too on the nose. Especially since Lady Douve is still not over her shock.

"To be kin… With her…"

"Lady Douve, please get a hold of yourself." Blois offers her support, and a touch of sympathy.

Yeah, I understand that. I wouldn't want to be kin with Happine, either. Lady Douve has her flaws, but Happine's got plenty of her own.

"But the rest… Still, to be kin…"

Giving up here feels like a defeat, but so would being related to Happine. It would seem she's dealing with the greatest dilemma she's faced up to this point in her life. All of this is the kind of wreckage left in the wake of a harem-type protagonist.

For the moment, Lady Douve places any plans with Tahlan on hold and chooses to take him with her back to the Academy.

Part 8 — Justice

“I believe that settles this matter.”

“Yes, it is a good outcome. Hopefully, they will refrain from any further indiscretions.”

After the departure of the House Sepaeda party and Tahlan, the young mystic and the hex caster exchange a quiet word at the estate.

Their relief is restricted to having taken care of a difficult problem.

“I find no comfort in making use of the fear of hex casters, but…”

“That is what makes us a necessary evil.”

“It’s a legitimate task. I cannot call that an evil.”

“Using fear to coerce the truth… If that is not evil, then I do not know what the word means.”

It isn’t publicly known, but the two often collaborate on difficult matters.

It is, of course, due to Lady Paulette requesting Douverb’s help, but the sole reason was to ensure the survival of the “Scarred Fool.”

Without the presence of a mystic and a hex caster, it was difficult even to keep him alive. His nickname is hardly an exaggeration.

“…The revolutionary government is still demanding that our kingdom hand over the exiled nobles.”

“Indeed?”

“It seems that they will not be content until they have taken everything from the exiles and have wiped them off the face of this world.”

Of course, there is no reason for the Arcana Kingdom to accede to the revolutionary government’s demands.

Whether a revolutionary government or a military junta, if they have overthrown the existing ‘regime,’ the kingdom will have to recognize the new government as the legitimate authority in that country. However, the nobility can’t afford to simply abandon their relations, especially relations who have come to them for succor, no matter how distant the blood tie. The exiled nobles, while disgraced, weren’t criminals. There was no obligation on the kingdom’s part to turn them over, whatever the demands from the neighboring government.

“It is best not to mince words. I fear they are beyond mollifying.”

“…It is a tragic thing for a people to lose sight of tolerance and mercy.”

They have no legal obligation to do so… However, there is some desire to have the new government owe them a favor. Going a step further, if the matter can be solved simply by handing over the most prominent of the exiled nobility, then nobles like Lady Paulette were certainly willing to compromise. They are a force that has overthrown an entire government, after all. There is no benefit to making an enemy of them.

Yet, even then, the kingdom had come together in refusing that demand.

“The people of that country have acquired a taste for blood. They will not stop, nor will they realize that they have gone from being the oppressed to

being the oppressor. No, perhaps it's more accurate to state that they desire to become the oppressor."

"Justice, victory, glory… Once tasted, such things are an addictive opiate to the masses. No doubt the catharsis was sweet, bringing down the crowned heads that once oppressed them."

The Arcana Kingdom's elite had already come to an uncomfortable realization. Even if they turned over all of the exiled nobles and their wealth, the new regime would still make war upon their kingdom. The new regime simply had no choice. Rather, it was the only choice they were capable of making.

"As a wielder of a cursed art like the Hex Arts, I am always aware of my sins. I cannot afford to enjoy my work."

"I, as well. While I have the ability to heal, I cannot allow myself to find joy in the gratitude of my patients. It is right to find fulfillment in my purpose, but it is not right to cure people for my own self-regard."

The members of the new regime, having gained wealth through their conquests, have distributed it to their people. There's nothing wrong with that. Any new regime can fail if it doesn't secure the hearts of its people.

Yet they still struggle with the gulf between reality and expectations. There should be more to distribute, but there simply isn't enough to go around.

Inevitably, they will come to a particular conclusion: the missing wealth was stolen by the exiled nobles who had left the country.

"Seeing the exiled nobility up close, it's clear that they were not good stewards of their lands. However, despite having been engaged in a civil war, they still believe their rulers have stolen their country's wealth."

"War comes with expenses; more importantly, it reduces tax revenues. Even if the old regime had great wealth stored up, they likely spent much of it attempting to put down the new regime's rebellion."

"Indeed… Life was supposed to improve with the defeat of evil, but life remains as hard as ever. The need to repair and rebuild all that was lost in the war means they are forced to maintain a harder life for longer."

If prosperity doesn't come after the fall of evil, then it must mean evil is still present elsewhere. The solution then is to seek out that evil and defeat it. Only when that is done will prosperity finally come to everyone.

"Unlike a rebellion, improving matters through wise governance and reform takes time. I have also heard that the wave of purges has also created strong resentment in the various rural regions."

"Killing is so simple, after all, even if it is the worst solution to injustice."

We are just, and we are the victors: that is simple logic. Therefore, all that must be done to repeat that same process. After all, that is what brings catharsis.

"Confusing means and ends… A common story."

"Add to that unrest at home, and threats abroad… No doubt the Royal Family will prefer full-scale war."

Paulette prayed against the great war that was set to begin. A war where vast sums are spent and countless lives are lost... That was what lay in wait.

“At the very least, we must unite the Four Great Houses.”

“Victory will not be the end, but merely part of the process... It will have to be that way.”

There are already several thousand, several tens of thousands of soldiers, arrayed along the border as a show of resolve. House Caputo has gathered a force of its own, but no doubt they will be unnecessary. That is because House Caputo’s ace is most suited for use in an all-out war.

“No matter how many thousands of soldiers the enemy brings to our lands, we will no doubt simply have Shouzo kill most of them... I find myself filled with foreboding and guilt...”

The results are likely to terrify the ace-less Royal Family.

Because the Cursed Farmer won’t even leave bodies upon the battlefields he tills.

Part 9 — Complicated

“W-Why are you here, brother?”

“It’s been a long time, Sunae.”

“Lady Douve, please maintain your composure.”

“Perhaps it’s a misunderstanding.” Lady Douve held on that sliver of hope, only to have it dashed the moment we reached the Academy.

Magyan Tahlan, brother of the foreign princess... With his status as a royal, without any claim to the right of succession, he is an ideal husband for Lady Douve.

The issue is that, through Saiga, she would end up related to Happine, who she views as her inferior. To Lady Douve the only thing that could end in would be humiliation. The shock to her was so profound that she needed Blois to hold her up.

“You have always been reckless. You, who holds a right of succession entirely unlike myself, getting betrothed without permission. And to do so by revealing your status as royalty...”

“M-My apologies. But I did not make the decision to marry lightly...”

“With your Royal Presence, you have certain obligations. You should be well aware of that! No individual with the right of succession has a right to marry solely at her own discretion! What makes you believe you can take such liberties?!”

“Mmph... My apologies...”

Despite her warrior spirit, Sunae can’t seem to offer much defiance to Tahlan’s own spirit, particularly when he has a sound argument behind his criticism.

“Please don’t be so hard on Sunae.”

“Ah, so you are Saiga. The man my sister forced her betrothal upon, yes?”

“I wouldn’t say she forced it upon me, but yes, we’re engaged! I’m serious about it!”

“That goes without saying! If that weren’t the case, I would kill the man who toyed with my sister! However, this is not a lecture as her brother, but as a prince of the kingdom!”

Even the dashing and charming prince is still plainly angry at his sister getting engaged without consulting anyone else. He’s got the right of it. Considering that the Royal Presence is part of the right of succession, marrying without permission could, at worst, split the kingdom into competing camps.

“At a minimum, you owe it to Father to go and report your engagement. If you are serious, then you must respect the process. Regardless of her being part of the Royal Family, that is something you owe to her as a man, is it not?”

“I-I’m sorry...”

“But I shall end my lecture there. Now, you are Lady Happine Batterabbe, yes? I hear you have done much for my sister in her time here. I would like to thank you, on behalf of my father, the King.”

Breezily wrapping up his lecture, he turns to Happine, who had been cowering nearby. Just as Lady Douve has vouched for Lain and my conduct, Happine has done the same for Sunae.

“N-Not at all! I haven’t done much…”

“I hear she’s been provided an opportunity to study at this Academy… I’m not one to talk, but to hear that she’s awoken to the joys of learning in a foreign kingdom… When did you become so fond of learning? No doubt your tutors in our homeland will weep with joy to hear it. Surely you aren’t here simply to accompany your man…?”

“W-Well…”

Tahlan throws the House Batterabbe party for a loop, forcing them to dance to his own tune. I suppose this is what they mean by royal charisma. Meanwhile, our Lady Douve is still reeling. This must be how complicated, drama-filled relationships end up hurting everyone involved.

“…Lady Douve, what shall we do about courting Prince Tahlan?”

“On hold for now…”

“Ahm. Yes, milady.”

Lady Douve responds to my question weakly, returning from the faraway place she had been lingering in. She’s taken this much harder than I expected. Just how much lower-status did she think Happine was, compared to her? I mean, they’re technically peers. Isn’t this going just a bit too far in the disrespect department?

“Ahm, so, dear brother… Did you duel Master Sansui?”

“Quite. It seems you have also witnessed his skill?”

“Yes, it was a skill beyond my wildest dreams.”

“I have thoroughly fallen for it. While I did accompany them to see you, I also seek the honor of becoming his apprentice.”

Tahlan pushes the narrative forward. I still don’t intend to take him as an apprentice.

“I see. Even you couldn’t best him.”

“Yes, he swatted me aside easily, in spite of my having no peers with the blade in our homeland.”

“…I have yet to fight him directly, but I cannot imagine besting him.”

“—Even with your Royal Presence?”

“Yes. It felt that I glimpsed the most abyssal depths of martial skill.”

In his conversation with Sunae, Tahlan seems to be holding back his sheer joy just below the surface. He continues looking toward me, then there’s another rush of joy. This deep joy…it must be the excitement of a true swordsman. My expression must have been like that when I first met him.

“Tell me, Master Sansui, why does your mistress seem so distressed?”

“Well… Lady Douve has been seeking a man worthy of standing at her side. Forgive me for my insolence, but it appears she decided you were an ideal candidate when she first met you.” Blois, supporting Lady Douve, answers instead of me.

“Such an honor! We men, when we see a woman, weigh them as potential partners quite similarly.” Tahlan laughs breezily. His capacity for accepting other people as they are is rather impressive. I mean, it’s not exactly a pleasant thing to be weighed up like a roast.

“I have no complaints on my end. A daughter of one of the kingdom’s great families, and such an attractive figure. If she truly desires such a union, I would certainly accept. Yet she doesn’t look pleased.”

“The issue is… Lady Douve does not think particularly highly of…your sister’s guardian, and Saiga’s fiancée, Lady Happine Batterabbe…”

It’s a matter of winning and losing in life. I mean, there are plenty of men who think of relationships in a similar way, and Tahlan nods in understanding.

“Ah… So she found a flaw.”

“That is correct. My apologies.”

“Oh, do not concern yourself. It’s an innocent conflict within a young woman’s heart. No, if anything, I’m flattered to be well-regarded by such a woman!”

Man, he’s just got such a generosity of spirit. He’s reassuring just to talk to. Yes, he’s the sort of person I’d want Lady Douve to marry.

“Very well, could I trouble you to introduce me to the person in charge of this Academy? I owe them my thanks for all they’ve done for my sister.”

I couldn’t contain my unease at this completely natural request.

Part 10 — Instruction

“Very well, everyone, we will shortly have a demonstration of the Rare Art known as ‘Shadow Summoning.’”

The old gentlewoman who had spoken, the Regent, happily started the public lecture.

Unlike last time, this lecture is starting in the large coliseum-style training grounds, which means she plans to have him fight someone.

“The wielder of this Rare Art who has agreed to demonstrate its use for us is Magyan Sunae’s older brother, Magyan Tahlan. While he does not have the right to succession, he is still a royal. Please bear that in mind in your interactions with him.”

I seem to recall that she rather casually had a princess, one who *was* in the line of succession, act like a carnival show piece, too. I mean, sure, she was only doing it to satisfy her academic curiosity, and not for profit, but still.

“I am, as noted, Magyan Tahlan. I had heard that the study of magic using mana was extremely well developed in this kingdom, and having seen this Academy, I understand where such power has come from. I see that many of you have come here to study magic, as well as other academic fields. I am extremely honored to contribute what I can to that study.”

There are quite a few students and faculty seated in the stands. In particular, there’s a ripple of sighs as the women and girls in the stands admire Tahlan, the very picture of an exotic foreign prince. I mean, he’s a man who made even Lady Douve stop to admire him the first time she saw him. For your average student, he’s handsome enough that even a glimpse is enough to elicit a dreamy sigh.

“Shadow Summoning uses Shadow Presence to craft shadow duplicates. It is a simple Art, with three basic variations in its use.”

It’s an Art that creates tangible shadow duplicates of the wielder. It carries with it the thrill of the supernatural, although not to the extent of hex magic. Like the Immortal Arts, it’s an Art well suited for supporting the wielder’s other abilities.

“The first use is creating shadows that follow predetermined movements. Once created, one cannot alter their movements or erase them. However, that makes them the easiest to create, and it is thus possible to create a large number of them all at once.”

As he explains while standing on the training ground stage, first one shadow, then a second, ripple out from his silhouette and line up next to him.

The response from the girls in the stands seems to be that there’s been an increase in the amount of eye candy. I hear shrill cheers from sections of the stands. However, Lady Douve, sitting in the VIP section, has yet to recover from her shock. Perhaps Lady Douve has a bit of a metaphorical glass jaw, after all.

“In my case, I can create up to ten shadows. This puts me near the pinnacle of technique among my fellow Shadow Summoners. It would be safe to consider ten to be the upper limit.”

After making note of this, Tahlan pushes the shadow next to him from behind. Having no other commands but to stand there, the shadow fell flat on its face, without changing its position or expression.

The women in the crowd let out a scream, while I feel a ripple of annoyance from the men. I didn’t need to read their auras for that one.

“This restriction of pre-determined movements can be difficult to use well. It takes practice to even create shadows that can stand still or walk. This is because one cannot simply create the shadow, order it to stand or walk, and have it take that action.”

“So it’s a bit like programming a robot…” After hearing the explanation, Saiga murmurs to himself in the House Batterabbe VIP box.

I understand what he’s getting at. That was more or less what I was thinking. It’s just that it’s been so long that I’d forgotten the exact terminology.

“Next are shadows that can be controlled from a distance. In this case, rather than having them take predetermined actions, it’s possible to adjust what the shadows do as the situation develops. As is to be expected, this cuts down on the number that can be controlled at once. Even I can only manage three at one time… Finally, there is what one can call a true duplicate.”

After erasing all the other shadows, Tahlan takes a dramatic pause before closing his eyes in concentration.

A few heartbeats later, a single shadow duplicate appears.

“This is the shadow I use primarily for scouting.”

The shadow speaks instead of Tahlan himself. Much of the crowd leans forward to get a better view when they see this. Many of them are having trouble sorting out which is actually the shadow.

Indeed, even with my senses, I have a hard time telling the difference. It seems that they’re connected at the level of awareness.

“Everything that this shadow sees and hears, I know as though witnessing it with my own eyes and ears. It will, of course, vanish if it takes enough punishment, but I, myself, am left unscathed. The only weakness is that controlling it requires intense focus, leaving me unable to move my own body.”

Given how much information he’s sharing, I suppose this information is common knowledge in his homeland. I suppose that’s the only way an Art can ever develop.

“Oh my. That was a wonderful demonstration! Please give Master Tahlan a round of applause.”

Considering the amount of practice required, it seems like something of a bother, but it also seems useful and even fun. It’s certainly well matched to swordplay. Of course, that’s true for other weapons, as well.

“However, no doubt there are many among you who can’t quite picture how to fight with such an Art.”

“So you propose a more competitive demonstration?”

“Yes. I myself would like to see how a Shadow Summoner fights. No doubt you, too, would like to see how a magic user from this kingdom fights, yes?”

With that, the Regent’s lips quirked in a mischievous smile.

“Miss Sunae, who wields Spirit Possession through her Royal Presence; Mister Saiga, who wields Mysticism through his holy power; and Master Tahlan, who summons shadows through his Shadow Presence… How about it: a match, not against a magic swordwielder, but rather a dedicated spellcaster?”

For a moment I wondered if I had imagined the words. I feel a competitive fire flare from within the wizened body, a gentle taunting from her lips… The Academy’s students and faculty evidently saw nothing unusual in the sight.

“It may be unbecoming of someone as old as I am, but indulge me, mm?”

Wait, *you’re* going to be the one fighting?

Part 11 — Magic

After my defeat at Sansui's hands, I'd started my training over, working back up from the very basics.

Well, to be honest, it hasn't even been a year since I arrived in this world, so I should probably phrase it as having truly started training in earnest for the first time.

It was a shock to learn that I'd lost to someone who had spent the last five hundred years training. The reality was a lot to handle. Putting that knowledge aside, though, I felt I needed to properly learn to harness my own abilities through rigorous practice.

"Well then, shall we get started? Mister Saiga, you're up first."

Right as I begin that process, the Regent catches me off guard with her wild proposal.

It hadn't occurred to me that the Regent, who was a standard magic user, rather than a wielder of the Rare Arts, would propose such an idea.

"Oh, just in case… I'm going to have to ask you not to use Miss Eckesy. You'd be too much for me if you had her in hand."

"Oh. Y-Yes, ma'am."

I can only use my divination and mysticism in public. That's because everyone else besides me can only use a single type of magic. And I can't very well use Eckesachs. She's right, it wouldn't be fair. But that also means I won't really be able to bring the full scope of my abilities into play.

"Still, I need to do my best."

To the others at the Academy, I'm just some guy who lost to the greatest duelist. The man who challenged the invincible master swordsman and lost. It didn't affect my reputation, either for good or for ill. But I'm still not over it.

"Saiga, the Regent is called the Great Sage, but she's also supposed to be an amazing spellcaster! Be careful!"

"She may have been great once, but she retired long ago. Do not falter. Remember my brother is watching!"

"P-Please a-avoid getting h-hurt."

"I know."

I take the magic sword at my hip, the one that Happine's dad gave me, and walk onto the stage.

As I make my way down, Eckesachs calls out to me.

"Saiga."

"I know, I know, you're going to tell me to win, right?"

"…It would be one thing if you were to use me, but without me you stand no chance. Go and learn from her superior skill."

Everyone reacts with surprise at the high regard that Eckesachs, the most ancient being here, older even than Sansui, has for the Regent.

"Eckesachs…"

“There is no shame in losing. But don’t let it break you. She’s not an opponent you’re ready to beat yet.”

“Already concerned about what’ll happen when I lose, huh…?”

“You’re still a work in progress. You’re not risking your life. Accept that you will lose in front of this crowd.”

My Mystic Arts are something I use often in public, so I’m relatively skilled in their use.

So long as I use my armor or wall of light, I should be able to guard against fire magic easily. That overconfidence is going to be my downfall. That must be it.

“I’m ready, ma’am.”

“Well, then, shall we get started? I have to show that even the old can earn their keep.”

The Regent and I face off at a long distance. Sansui and I started off about fifty meters apart, but now there’s at least a hundred meters between me and the Regent. I agree that it’s only fair. It wouldn’t be much of a fight if we started out at melee range.

“Before we begin, allow me to explain the purpose of this demonstration.”

Her words weren’t directed at people like me, Sunae, or Tahlan, who were going to participate in the duels. She was, instead, addressing the others in the arena: the teachers and students. That is, not the Rare Arts users, but the mana-users who wielded magic.

“My intent is to show you the answer to the question: Can a standard magic user defeat a combat trained Rare Arts user?”

With that, the Regent pointed her staff in my direction.

It looks like a staff out of a picture book: a wooden staff carved out of gnarled wood. When she points it at me… My divination shows me an image of a fireball flying in my direction.

“Burning Soul!”

“Pride Wall!”

The fireball hurtles toward me, crossing the hundred meters of distance in a flash.

Having seen that spell before, I block it with a wall of light.

“Oh dear. You’ve hardened your wall, haven’t you…”

The difference this time is that, rather than dissipating, the flame continues to burn as it’s blocked by my wall. It’s blocking my line of sight, which renders my precognition meaningless. Regardless of what the Regent intends to do, I am forced to realize once again that precognition doesn’t confer omniscience.

Just like it was with Sansui, even if my premonitions are correct, if I don’t respond correctly, I just end up cornering myself like a chess piece.

“Now, let us review the basics of magic. No doubt most of you are already aware that magic, in the narrowest sense, that is, magic in the formal use of the term, has four schools, or subtypes: earth, water, fire, and

wind. As you practice a school, you learn to wield superior versions of that school's elemental type."

The Regent explains casually, but the image that appears in my head is terrifying.

It's an image of death, as something pierces the wall holding back the flames, then proceeds to go right through my head.

I reflexively move my body, shifting my position with the wall still protecting me.

With that, the precognition changes. The wall is still breached, but I remain unscathed.

"Earth becomes iron, water becomes ice, wind becomes lightning, and fire — Heat Ray!"

I didn't even hear a sizzling noise. The image I saw before now plays out in front of me.

"—becomes heat. When concentrated and fired as a ray, heat can easily penetrate even a mystic's wall of light."

The flames dissipate and I dismiss my wall of light. The duel is over. I've lost.

Compared to the wall of light, which had to defend a wide area, the Regent had focused her heat ray on a single point.

If I had Eckesachs, I might have been able to stop it by protecting myself with armor made of light as well as with the wall, but that's just an excuse.

"Now, understand that a focused ray is harder to aim. Even at long range, the area of effect is small. As you can see, the target only needs to move a little bit to avoid it. And my eyesight isn't what it used to be."

That's definitely not true. If I hadn't avoided it through my divination, I would have died in an unfortunate accident... While she knew I'd avoid it, she's still awful for aiming it at me in the first place.

"Heat magic is understated, so no doubt it was difficult for those of you in the back to have noticed. However, just know that with heat magic and lightning magic, one can easily penetrate mystically created armor. This is partly why there are so many users of fire and wind magic."

It's not like I thought that my mystic wall was unbreachable. Mystics are still human, after all. Their walls aren't absolute defenses, just a bit tougher than your average defense.

At the very least, the first time I fought Sunae, she nearly destroyed the wall with her Spirit Possession, while her claws and fangs had also pierced my armor, but I had thought that was because she was using Spirit Possession, a Rare Art unique to her royal line.

That belief had just been utterly shattered. Even normal magic, the kind that most people can use, will go through my wall with enough practice.

"This means those of you who practice the Mystic Arts must avoid putting too much faith in your defenses. The Mystic Arts are a relatively common Rare Art in our kingdom, but for that reason there are a number of counters available for it. Indeed, there was a particular wielder of lightning

magic who was famous for his ability to destroy mystic barriers. Until a few years ago, the Grand Commander of the Royal Guard was a man famous as the ‘Thunder Knight.’”

With that, she casts an obvious glance at Sansui.

“As there is nothing that moves faster than lightning, none could match the Thunder Knight. Until his sudden retirement, he was known as this kingdom’s greatest warrior.”

Sansui is grimacing visibly.

Wait... Is Sansui behind the Thunder Knight’s retirement?

“Now, if the question is whether or not heat magic is the greatest, invincible and equally capable in all situations, then that’s also not the case. Can I ask you to come up next, Miss Sunae?”

“Acknowledged.”

Having fought me before, Sunae’s aware of how tough a mystical wall can be, and she walks enthusiastically down to the training grounds.

For myself, I head back to the VIP section.

“Sniff... I had no idea that the Regent was that strong...”

“Are you unhurt?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

Evidently Happine also hadn’t been aware that heat magic could pierce mystical walls.

If she hadn’t known, then I had no way of knowing, either. But I guess this is a sign that I’m not studying enough, even though I’m attending the Academy. I should probably focus on some academic study, in addition to my sword and magic training.

“Well?”

“I don’t think I could have blocked it, even at full power.”

“As expected. Keep that in mind. Magic isn’t common in this kingdom simply because there are many individuals with that talent. It’s also because it’s extremely practical and effective.”

After listening to Eckesachs’s explanation, I retake my seat.

Before me, Sunae in her form as a giant lioness and a happily smiling Regent are facing off on the platform. Given that he’ll be fighting last and that it’s his sister on the stage, I wonder how Tahlan is feeling.

Glancing over at him where he sits in the House Sepaeda section, he doesn’t look concerned so much as tense. It doesn’t look like he wants to stop his sister from fighting.

“I’ll make a note of this just in case, but since both magic and Spirit Possession will end up killing the opponent if they hit, this match will be non-contact. In other words, we’ll consider it over if a single blow lands.”

“Understood.”

“Then let us begin... Red Carpet!”

After stating the fight’s conditions, the Regent hits the ground with her staff. The ground then erupts in flame, which rapidly spread out along the

ground. The spell indiscriminately sears the ground across a wide area, and it's hardly something that can be used indoors.

"That's not fair! A single hit will end the match! It's cheating, using an unavoidable spell like that!"

"What are you on about? Beasts are quick. Going after their legs is an obvious tactic," Eckesachs dismisses Happine's complaint, rather coolly.

Yes, Sunae's very fast when she's in her lioness form. I remember having a lot of trouble hitting her. This is probably what Sansui meant about 'knowing your opponent well.'

"Grrrr! This is nothing!"

With the flames striking out toward her feet, Sunae takes a running leap before the fire can touch her.

Because of the distance between the two, the Red Carpet took longer to cover the ground between the Regent and Sunae than Sunae takes leaping across it. Moreover, Spirit Possession is an Art that raises the user's agility. At this rate, Sunae's going to be able to attack the Regent while she's still airborne.

"Burning Soul!"

But the Regent had already anticipated that.

No matter how fast you may be, it's impossible to change your trajectory in mid-air, and as a giant lioness, Sunae makes for a big target.

The fireball the Regent calmly unleashed heads toward Sunae, harmlessly dissipating in mid-air before it hits.

"Well done!"

The laudatory words come from Sunae's brother, Tahlan.

Yes, there's no other way to describe what happened, particularly including the last bit where she dissipated the fireball before it hit Sunae. The Regent showed perfect control of her magic. With enough practice and thought, a fire spell that I can use could be used to beat Spirit Possession.

Sunae stands on the stage, which is now devoid of flames, looking disappointed at herself. She's not going to start demanding the Regent marry her, is she...?

"Now, this may go without saying, but even if that spell had hit her, Miss Sunae could likely have killed me. We don't have much data on Spirit Possession, but it's difficult for anti-personnel spells to inflict a lethal wound in one shot. Therefore, you must understand that the goal of this demonstration was simply to make contact."

"...Don't mistake my pride for a lack of honor. I know full well you could have just used a heat ray instead, if it were an actual battle."

"Mm, that's actually a pretty hard spell to use on the fly. I'm not a combat specialist, you know."

Not a combat specialist, huh...but she fought just as I imagined a spellcaster would fight.

She can probably do a lot of damage if she has someone in front of her to protect her, like a mystic who can cast a wall spell.

“Besides, if I wanted to kill you in that giant form with my heat magic, I would have to hit a vital point. You’re certainly aware of how difficult that would be.”

“…Thank you for the lesson, Honored Regent. I underestimated you when I dismissed your Art as foreign magic wielded by an old woman.”

“Oh my. You don’t need to bow your head to a little old lady like me.”

Despite having the secret technique of her royal family defeated in public, Sunae graciously accepts her defeat. I don’t know how I feel about saying it about myself, but unlike how I’ve behaved, her graciousness is really impressive. I mean, I made a bit of a fool of myself.

“While I think you’re all aware of this, part of the reason I managed to defeat these two so easily was because the starting conditions were perfect for me. It was a one-on-one duel with a substantial distance between us. It goes without saying that, in these circumstances, magic’s long effective range works in its favor. If we were standing at half that distance, I wouldn’t have had a prayer.”

“That’s just an excuse. It’s not something for the victor to say.”

“I’m a teacher. My responsibility is to explain the reasons for the outcome. My goal here isn’t to win, after all. Rather, my job is to teach the students and faculty a lesson.”

There’s no such thing as an absolute, invincible type of magic. You need to know your opponent and yourself, then prepare the conditions and spells necessary to win. With that knowledge, you can use ordinary magic to defeat a user of combat-oriented Rare Arts.

“…My apologies, brother.”

“Do not let it bother you. Your opponent was simply several steps ahead of you. There is no shame in losing to a more skilled opponent while in training. Instead, appreciate your good fortune in having this opportunity.”

“Yet, as one with the Royal Presence…”

“Continue your efforts. This is a place of learning. For the moment, focus on watching your brother’s fighting.”

With that, the person with the most combat experience steps on to the stage. Magyan Tahlan, the swordsman who fights using his shadow duplicates. So far as I can tell, it doesn’t sound like an excessively powerful Art. He’s probably the same type of Art user as Sansui.

“Before we begin, allow me to express my admiration.”

“Oh my, you’re going to praise a scheming old lady setting rules that are to her advantage, using that to win, and smiling about it?”

“Those are tactics, after all! If the responsibility of an instructor is to teach her students how to win, then this is a splendid example of such teaching.”

They stand at the same starting distance as Sunae and I. His Art is solely about creating shadow duplicates. How does he plan to close that distance?

“All that remains is to see how well my blade fares in this situation! Please, begin the lesson!”

“Oh, then I’ll have to do my best.”

Once again, the Regent unleashes the spell that sets fire to the ground. It’s not a very powerful spell in terms of raw damage and is something I can easily stop with my Mystic Arts. The wide area of effect must translate into less overall power.

But given that Tahlan can’t use water or earth magic to put out the flames, I wonder how he’s going to respond.

“Dance of Flying Stones!”

Getting a running start like Sunae, Tahlan releases a shadow toward the ground. He then steps on the shadow before it disappears, using it as a platform to leap into the air. Creating shadows in positions that lets him use them as jump-off points, Tahlan takes several leaps in rapid succession.

It’s probably a very simple use of his Art, but he’s able to keep jumping without being burned. For this situation, it’s a very effective technique.

“Oh, my.”

“It’s ordinarily a technique used to cross shallow rivers, but it’s very useful for a situation like this.”

The Regent fires off a large number of fireballs. While it’s ordinarily impossible to dodge while in midair, Tahlan avoids the projectiles by leaping from shadow to shadow. Unlike Sunae, he’s not taking particularly large leaps, so he can see where the Regent is aiming before taking his next jump.

“Flame Curtain!”

“Death Wall Dance!”

As Tahlan approaches, the Regent creates a wall of fire to try to block his progress. Tahlan sends his shadows charging into the flames. As most of the shadows disappear into the flames, a single one gets through…

“Oh dear, I lost.”

“…I took the liberty of winning, I’m afraid.”

When the flames subside, they reveal the Regent surrendering to a single shadow holding a blade to her throat, along with a pleasantly smiling Tahlan.

“I would imagine you had several other options if you wished to defeat me.”

“Mm? That would have been against the rules, no? This is a lesson. The point is to teach that the important thing is *how* you use your magic. I’m content as long as everyone takes home that lesson.”

“…Words worthy of a Great Sage. I tip my hat to you, Lady Regent.”

And this is how we learned that not only was the Regent a super powerful spellcaster, but that she was also a first-rate teacher.

Part 12 — Omen

“Ah, as expected of this kingdom’s highest official at its highest institution of learning. Such wisdom.”

Lady Douve is hosting a small welcoming party for Tahlan at the Sepaeda estate. While one can find fault with his odd desire to become my apprentice, at least he’s in a pleasant mood, appearing quite grateful for the various things he’s seen in this kingdom.

“…I cannot apologize enough for being humiliated in your presence.”

“Oh, don’t speak so ill of yourself. You were simply up against a superior opponent. If she had lethal intent, no doubt I would not have walked away unscathed, either.”

In the end, it seems the participants have learned the lesson the Regent wanted to impart, particularly given how well she displayed the effectiveness of common attack magic by using her fire spells. To put it simply, so long as there is sufficient distance between a mage and their opponent, and they understand their opponent’s capabilities, that mage can take advantage of their long combat range to put up a very effective fight.

“Still, as one with the Royal Presence…”

“Then, tell me, why is it you left our homeland? Was it to use Spirit Possession to oppress the weak? Surely not. You left to seek out new and stronger opponents, did you not? In that case, you must face this defeat and move beyond it.”

The most potent property of magic is in its range. In fact, so far as I’m aware, the only Art capable of attacking at long range is elemental magic. The advantages of range, of course, are well-known to those of us from Earth.

“This is a good school. Bring home lessons from this place when you return to the homeland.”

“I shall…”

“…He really is quite the man.”

“Yes, a very fine gentleman, in my estimation.” Lady Douve looks over at Tahlan wistfully. Lady Douve seems to have a decent eye for men.

Of course, I feel like there’s way too big of a gulf between her number one candidate, Tahlan, and her number two candidate, which is me.

“Sansui… Do what you can to keep him here. At the very least, take him as your apprentice.”

“…If I were to do that, I would need permission from my Master. As I am not permitted to return to him yet, I would only be able to take you part of the way.”

“In that case, well… I’d like to meet him as well.”

“Papa, I want to meet your Master, too!”

Wait, why do all of you want to meet my Master…? I mean, maybe I’m biased, being his apprentice, but he’s not a fun person to be around. Really, comparing him to the Regent, I also realized that he wasn’t a particularly

good teacher, either. Besides, neither of us have ever really considered teaching anyone who only has a single normal lifespan.

“Then I demand you take me with you! I have ages worth of things to say to Suiboku!”

Oh, right. There’s another person here who knows my Master. Well, not a person. A sword.

To think there’d be someone with such an ancient history with my Master, such that I wouldn’t know of it even after five hundred years as his pupil…

“However… I do want to clarify one thing before we continue… Prince Tahlan.”

“Just Tahlan is fine. I have no right of succession nor the right to use the Magyan family name.”

“Very well, Tahlan…I’m an Immortal, one who wields the Immortal Arts through my Immortal Presence, which means…”

“Truly?!”

Huh? He’s heard of us? Are Immortals that popular? I mean, Sunae hadn’t heard of us, at least.

“Immortal…as in, the Immortals who retreat into the mountains and spend all their time training… Those Immortals?”

“Y-Yes, that’s right. For various reasons, I’m currently serving as Lady Douve’s bodyguard and am employed by House Sepaeda. However… Until five years ago, I’d spent the previous five hundred years deep in the woods, training with my Master.”

Ordinarily it would be something to laugh about, having a man who looks less than twenty years old making such a claim. An Immortal really ought to look their age.

“No wonder… It felt like I was fighting mist or dew. If your sword is the result of that much training, then I can understand why.”

“The Royal Guard said the same thing…”

Lady Douve, that’s technically still a secret.

“You’ve heard of them, brother?”

“Yes. They are legendary figures from a nation far to the east of our kingdom. I had heard it would be even further away if traveling there from these lands, but to run into an Immortal swordsman here…”

I suppose it’s only to be expected, but it seems there’s knowledge of Immortals in certain circles. Still, regardless of whether they exist or not, Saiga should have heard of the concept of Immortals as well, even as a rumor. Did he not wonder if my appearance and age might not be the same after it was mentioned that I use the Immortal Arts?

“…I just thought you’d been brought here recently…same as I was.”

Noting my gaze, Saiga makes an excuse.

“That’s understandable.”

“Well, when I’d heard you’d been here for at least five years, I probably should have thought it a bit odd.”

I certainly look young, even child-like, and since Saiga didn't have a Master, it wasn't particularly odd for him to come to that particular conclusion based on his own experiences.

"If you can lead the way, I would certainly like to ask that favor of you. It would be an honor to meet the Master who taught you."

"As to whether I can fulfill your hopes…neither my Master nor I had ever contemplated teaching the sword to people with finite lifespans…"

I mean, given that I'd spent those five hundred years taking nothing but practice swings… Of course, I can hold my head up high and know that it was the proper way, but I can also flat-out state it's not something a normal person could hope to emulate.

"Any instruction at all would be appreciated. After all, the reason I left my homeland was because I had come up against my own limits. If I can speak with someone who has reached greater heights of mastery, then perhaps it can light the way for me, as well."

His commitment to moving ahead is definitely something I should learn from. It really is important to be able to assess oneself modestly and to keep seeking greater heights.

"Sunae, your brother really is amazing… In my case, after fighting him three times and losing each time, I didn't feel the desire to become Sansui's apprentice… How do I put it? Sansui just felt too far away."

"Heh…as expected. Tahlan may lack the Royal Presence, and thus the right of succession, yet even then, he was widely admired by the people for his character. My father, the king, told me to look to Tahlan, his eldest, as my guide."

Too far away. That, too, was something I'd heard many times before. The heights that my Master reached, up to and including his abandonment of Eckesachs, and the path I sought to walk, are so far removed from logic as to be a mastery of not just the sword, but of irrationality.

That there weren't many people who wanted to emulate my path once I'd walked it, well… That's really only natural.

"I'm the same way…I have an older brother as well, but… He's a very impressive person…and I felt so small next to him…"

Zuger must be referring to Douverb. Certainly he seemed to be a man unmoved by doubt. As a sort of executioner, no doubt he needs to be that way.

"My brother is also…"

Lady Douve tries to bring out His Brothership as a comparison. He was, of course, an admirable figure, ably handling the responsibilities of leading one of the Four Great Houses. I certainly think he's a figure worthy of admiration, anyway. Not that I know much about politics and governing.

Yet, Lady Douve, have you forgotten why you've invited everyone to your own estate, even Happine, who you consider your inferior, and why you hosted Tahlan's welcoming party here?

“Lady Douve, His Brothership and His Fathership have assembled a fully-armed cavalry company and are heading toward this estate.”

“...Oh, I see. Go smack some sense into them and bring them over. Try to avoid any disrespect.”

“Douve’s brought a man into her home?! DAMN HIM!”

“KILL HIM! AND HIS ENTIRE FAMILY!”

“Hrmph! Did you want us to praise your skill like we usually do?”

“It’s hard to consider this a proper welcome for your master’s family...”

We wouldn’t have been able to dismiss a cavalry charge at the House Batterabbe estate as some kind of practical joke. With that in mind, we held the welcoming party at the House Sepaeda estate.

Our fears were quickly realized, and the current and former lords of House Sepaeda led a charge at their daughter’s estate before I swiftly subdued them and tied them to their chairs.

“Father, My Lord. This was done at my instruction.”

“Hrmph, you’re still young. You should leave these matters to me.”

“That’s right. There is a time for all things. And you’re not in a position where you can marry at your own discretion.”

“My peak as a woman is passing right before my eyes.”

Even hearing Lady Douve’s sincere statement, His Brothership and His Fathership pretend not to hear. I really have my doubts if their behavior is in any way justifiable for nobility.

“It’s been half a day since I arrived in the Royal Lands... To assemble such cavalry and come from the capital in that time... A wonderful level of readiness.”

Tahlan seizes on a thread he can praise them on. Should he really be offering praise, given that he had almost been attacked by that force? I mean, isn’t that the unjust punishment he’d worried about in House Caputo’s lands? There’s not even a pretense at a trial this time.

“My apologies, Master Tahlan, at the disrespect you’ve received from my brother and father... Well, it goes beyond just disrespect, but still.”

“No, no, once my father learns that Sunae has gotten betrothed without his permission, he may very well wage war upon this kingdom. Fathers and brothers, I suppose, want to hold their sisters in a cage. Perhaps not admirable, but harmless.”

His ability to forgive seems to know no bounds. Honestly, it’s almost a little scary at this point. Then there’s Saiga, who looks about ready to start hyperventilating. At the very least, his nerves have him sweating bullets. I don’t know what else he was expecting, getting engaged to a princess who holds the right of succession. I mean, really.

“Besides, I now understand why House Sepaeda is considered a martial house. Both their mounts and knights are all of extremely high quality. No

wonder they recognized Master Sansui's worth. The cavalry are proof of careful selection and training. It's enough to make me envious!"

I do wonder how he feels about the fact that said cavalry is primarily being marshalled to try to kill him...

"Oh my..."

Lady Douve has an expression that's quite hard to put a name to.

Really, it just seems like she's fallen for him. I suppose that's to be expected given how positively he's interpreting everything. I mean, with a father and brother like these two, it'd be more natural to just lose interest, no matter how much he liked Lady Douve herself. If a Great House of a kingdom was so obsessed with killing you, no amount of beauty or wealth would be enough, unless the man was furnished with exceptional mental fortitude.

"You son of a...!"

"How dare you try to seduce Douve?!"

"Sansui, shut them up."

"Yes, milady."

"Setting that all aside, as House Batterabbe's future lord is here, do you mind if we confirm the contents of your report?"

"I hear you went to House Caputo's lands without our approval. I find it hard to believe that their daughter would ask for Sansui's aid without offering anything in return. She must have been facing quite a dilemma."

Having regained consciousness, the two of them have switched to business mode so quickly as to be rather unnerving.

They're still restrained to their chairs, of course.

Seeing the two lords of House Sepaeda in this state, the members of House Batterabbe are all disquieted. Tahlan's the only one evidently unaffected by the sight.

"Yes, she informed me that House Caputo and House Disea also have aces up their sleeves, similar in nature to Sansui and Saiga. That, and that House Caputo was willing to use their card."

The words rattle the House Batterabbe party, which is to be expected. Panic is the right response to learning that there are more people with broken abilities like Saiga or myself.

By contrast, His Brothership and His Fathership seem calm. If anything, they seem to have expected this news.

"Caputo and Disea are Great Houses, right?"

"Yes, House Caputo takes the lead on religious matters in the kingdom and has a strong connection to the various medical institutions scattered around the country. Disea is well known for its trade connections...but to think that there are several people like Saiga...and by using their card, is something about to happen...?"

"Could it be war?"

After a brief delay, Saiga begins to panic. I mean, come on, you're in one of the Four Great Houses, too. You should at least remember their names.

"Yes, I would consider it almost a certainty. The country Caputo shares a border with has just put down an internal rebellion, yet they've got forces concentrated at the border."

"And yet, despite this knowledge, House Caputo is moving slowly. They have a large number of mystics skilled in combat within their lands. It makes them good at defense, yet even then, they've avoided asking us for help."

"They must have quite an ace as their hole card. I suspect they will reveal it to the Royal Family rather than try to hide it. As to be expected of that House."

I don't know if it speaks well of House Sepaeda to note that they thought the best way to show off their ace in the hole was to have me smash the Royal Guard at the lord's accession party.

That aside, Tahlan and Sunae, who are technically complete outsiders, are listening in on the conversation. It feels like it should be an issue.

"My lords, if I may. Sunae participating in this conversation is one thing, but I am another. I believe I ought to step outside for a bit?"

"Once House Batterabbe hears of it, no doubt it will filter to your kingdom as well. There's no point in concealing any of this."

"Besides, the Magyan Kingdom is too far away for this to matter. We have so little interaction that there's no issue with them having that information."

You two are awfully calm and rational while you're tied to your chairs. They're plenty impressive when Lady Douve's involved, but why can't they show even a smidgen of this restraint with her?

"War... Why would it come to that?"

"Simple. Their coffers are empty and they're short on food."

"The old regime set fire to their country's castles just prior to their defeat in the civil war. The country remains depleted. The civil war itself was caused by widespread famines due to crop failures. If they don't take food from someone else, many of their subjects will starve over the winter."

The two lords of House Sepaeda calmly answer Saiga's question. They do so in terms even a novice can understand. Hearing this sort of talk makes me feel guilty for subsisting on mist. This sort of issue personally affects almost everyone, but it's not a problem that could possibly hurt my Master or myself. It means we're pretty much on the level of plants, and not even that of beasts, in terms of how seriously we're focused on surviving.

"But...couldn't we send them aid instead...?"

"That would be difficult. The crop failures occurred in our lands as well, meaning we don't have that much to give. Besides, the people won't stand for it."

"It's right and proper to wish to avoid war, but don't hesitate when it's necessary. Understand that there are such things as priorities. First and

foremost are the interests of your kingdom. Next, the interests of your lands. Finally, the interests of lands other than your own."

The lords of House Sepaeda impart a valuable lesson to Saiga, the future lord of House Batterabbe, despite being tied to their chairs. They'd seem a lot more impressive if that wasn't the case, really.

"But waging war over this is ridiculous! Isn't there some way to stop this?"

"We know it's ridiculous. But criticizing us as we're about to be invaded is meaningless. Go yell at them."

"It may be ridiculous, but no doubt we would take the same steps in a similar situation. It's about getting enough grain before your own reserves run out. It's smarter than waiting until you're out of food to panic. And while soldiers will die in a war, without the war, your subjects begin starving to death. That's the sort of war we face."

Well, but food doesn't affect me, so... It's times like these that I remember the wolf cubs that starved to death in the woods and feel a tinge of guilt.

"But to think that House Caputo has their own ace...I doubt even House Caputo is so unconcerned as to simply stand back and let the war happen..."

"Indeed...which means the issue may very well be the Royal Family..."

"Um...I don't know if I'm allowed to ask this, but you uh, say the Royal Family, you mean theirs, right? I'd heard that their country was now a republic..."

"No, we mean our royals, the House of Arcana."

His Brothership politely takes time to answer Zuger's question. His harsh gaze seems to be directed toward the royals, who aren't present.

"W-What is the issue, then?! A-Are we facing a civil war, t-too?!"

"No, things aren't quite that bad...but no doubt the Royal Family wants a full-scale war."

"O-Oh no! A full scale war...? A war until we eliminate the other country?!"

"I doubt it will go that far...but, at the very least, the Royal Family will not be satisfied with just a series of border skirmishes."

Why would that be? I can't quite understand the reasoning there.

"Our Royal Family is not a collection of fools. But because they are not fools, they will seek full-scale war if they feel they can win. Even if there's little to be gained from it."

"But...why?! The king and princess I know aren't the sort of people who would desire a full-scale war!" Happine says, in distress. I can remember seeing the princess, as well. She seemed to have been in shock after seeing me fight, but she didn't seem foolish.

"Think for a moment. What basis does the new regime over there have for waging war? Their coffers are depleted, meaning they need to win quickly and acquire our wealth. They're willing to take this gamble, despite

the fact that they'll be at a severe disadvantage if we beat them at the border and reinforce our defenses."

"I thought you said that's because their people will starve otherwise!"

"That is part of it. It's at least their motivation. But they only take the risk because they feel they can win. And that's because they have their own piece that's not constrained by common-sense considerations. Like Saiga or Sansui."

"But..."

"That's why they were able to overthrow the old regime. However, it still took them some time to take that old regime. Given that we have four aces ourselves, if we counter their piece with our aces...at the very least, we won't lose. After that, the relative difference in things like the economy will come into play."

The new regime in the neighboring country definitely has someone like Saiga or I, an individual far beyond the ordinary. However, even if that person could overthrow the old regime, the fact that it took them measurable time means that they can't be *that* ridiculous. At the very least, they're not specialized in mass destruction or assassination. Given that this kingdom has four such people of its own, we at least can force a stalemate between the overpowered individuals. All that remains after is to let the gaps elsewhere decide the issue.

Essentially, the richer party is going to win.

"At which point, all we would have to do is reinforce our borders like the enemy fears we would do. That would seal our victory."

"However, given that all four of the Great Houses have an ace, no doubt the Royal Family will feel the need to act. Understandable, given how they'll lose status relative to the Four Great Houses. Which means...they'll seek out an ace of their own."

Take the neighboring country's ace and make it a direct vassal of the Royal Family... They'll make that one of the terms for peace. It's the sort of condition that can only be forced after winning a full-scale war.

"My read is that the Caputo ace is too flashy to even try to hide... Enough so that the Royal Family is anxious."

"And House Disea owns *it*. No doubt someone has appeared who can use *it*. The Royal Family will imagine that as well..."

With that the pair look at Eckesachs.

"The Armor of Disaster, Pandora, the ultimate suit of armor. I believe you're aware of it."

"Mm...so a noble of this kingdom owned it all this time."

"Yes. Forged by the gods like you. House Disea had held it in its collection over the generations, as no one could use it. It gave weight to their name. But if they have someone who can use it, it becomes a remarkable ace in the hole."

Listening to this conversation, I'm starting to feel sorry for the Royal Family. With all four of the Great Houses owning an ace that can throw the

kingdom into chaos, their authority as royals is clearly undermined, and puts them in a much weaker position. And if they have no insurance against those aces, then they'll lose their influence as well…

"At any rate, we're still far from the worst possible scenario. We need to worry about how to win, of course, but that's the worst of it."

"House Caputo will likely hold the border on their own. All we have to do is provide reinforcements once they've taken some losses. It'll be an easy war. If the enemy has an ace, we will ask for you to intervene. We're counting on you there, Sansui."

I'd prefer that they wouldn't send an Immortal off to war so casually. Still, if it's a limited battlefield, it's not going to be that frightening.

"Papa, are there going to be scary things happening?"

"No, it'll be alright. There's nothing for you to worry about."

Yes, it'll just be a little full-scale war between countries. My role in all this is probably going to be mostly defensive. The people I need to protect, whether it's Lady Douve, Lain, or Blois, aren't going to be fighting on the frontlines.

Which is why I had no particular concerns about the war. At least, not at this point in time…

Part 13 — Fortunate Tidings

“Damn them…to turn my noble arm to stone…and that damned swordmaster. If only he had at least crushed at least one of that wretch’s arms…”

“Lord Nuri, we bring news.”

“What is it? It better be good.”

“Concerning the child. The nursemaid died within the territories of this kingdom. From there, she was picked up by some other party.”

“…Which means there is a chance she survives. Any information beyond that?”

“Yes, one more item of note. The master swordsman…he was hired by House Sepaeda five years ago, a daughter in tow. His daughter is approximately five years of age. In addition, her hair…”

“…Is silver. Is that even possible?!”

“As for her features, I am told she is the spitting image of…”

“Damn…we finally find the child, only to discover she’s already been taken in?! And by House Sepaeda?! DAMN!”

-To Be Continued-

Side Story — Colic and a Walk Among the Stars

As an Immortal, I’m always aware of the auras around me, even when I’m sleeping.

As a result, I can instantly react when Lain, who sleeps in the room next to me, awakens in a fussy mood.

It’s currently the middle of the night, and as such is an hour of the day where, even if you don’t go to sleep at sunset like I do, most people are likely to be abed. However, thanks to the dedicated nursemaid watching over her, Lain is quickly picked up by a reassuring pair of hands.

“Thank you for your concern, but this is my task. Please, return to your rest.”

As I enter the room where Lain and the nursemaid are, the nursemaid stops me. It’s an understandable reaction, of course, given that this is her job. Still, I’d sworn to my Master that I would raise this baby. While I’ve arranged for her to be raised in a good environment, I don’t want to just leave her care to other people and just pay the bills.

“I realize it’s an indulgence on my part. However, she doesn’t need her diaper changed, nor is she hungry. So, based upon that, allow me to hold her for a little while.”

“...Very well. Please, go ahead.”

Given my request, she doesn’t have much reason to refuse, and so she hands the still-crying baby over to me.

“I’ll be back shortly, so if you could wait here a while...”

“Certainly... I do ask that you avoid disturbing His Lordship or the others, though.”

Sure, no doubt a crying baby is an annoyance to some people. Even if they didn’t mind, it would still cost them their sleep. It’d be quite a problem if that interfered with the process of governing, and then it’d end up being this poor nursemaid’s fault.

“Yes, I’ll keep that in mind. I’ll be stepping outside for a bit.”

I open the room’s window, stepping out into the night sky.

“O-Oh my...”

There are mages in this world who can fly. As such, it’s not unnatural for someone like me to just fly out of the room. The nursemaid is surprised, but not to the point of raising a fuss.

“Alright, Lain. Why don’t we take a walk among the stars?”

As an Immortal, it’s more accurate to say I’m floating in midair, rather than actively propelling myself into the great beyond. It’s not suited for rapid movement, but it’s also very safe. Since I’m just floating like a balloon, Even if were to I trip and fall to the ground, since I’m just floating like a

balloon, the worst-case scenario is that I'd just dirty my clothing. It's like floating around in null gravity, or in water.

"The night breeze is pleasant, isn't it, Lain?"

The baby in my arms has mostly stopped crying. Lit by the moonlight and starlight, the night sky is very peaceful. With no electricity, there are few people awake at night. Almost everyone was asleep. That was no concern for the natural world, of course, with many nocturnal animals going about their nightly routines.

"That's a good girl. There's a bit of a breeze tonight, so why don't we have it carry us a bit?"

The night sky is still quiet, and we're gently floating along in it. Perhaps it's because she's being held by someone, but Lain has almost completely calmed down. I can feel her unease fading with each moment.

"Lain, she might not have been your mother, but there was a woman who died trying to protect you."

It might have been her actual mother, but it also could have been a nursemaid, like the woman back at the estate.

"Your mother might still be out there looking for you. But neither my Master nor I know enough to help you in that regard. If your mother appears in those woods looking for you, no doubt my Master will come find me."

I've dedicated myself to protecting you until that time. I have at least that much admiration for my Master.

"That person gave her life to protect you. I don't know the reason, and I honestly don't care. What I do know is that she brought you to us."

If she was a nursemaid, she must have had a reason to defend the baby, regardless of the consequences.

If her mother, then it may have just come naturally to exchange her life for her daughter's. That's not something that humans do alone. Many creatures will give their lives for their offspring. Given that, perhaps it's not a particularly remarkable thing.

Still, it was her dedication that brought this child's life to us. Even if it was something that anyone could do, it doesn't make what she did any less noble.

"I know nothing about this world, but I know that many people have raised children. Over the five hundred years I spent swinging my wooden sword next to my Master, many lives appeared and disappeared. I always thought that was a remarkable thing. I never thought I would be participating in it myself, but…at the very least, I will protect you until you're ready to stand on your own."

Of course, when actually thinking over it, I was born in Japan, a peaceful country, and raised without a care or worry in the world. I was only brought here due to divine error.

Then Master Suiboku took me on his apprentice, due entirely to God's introduction, and spent five hundred years training me without asking

anything in return. In comparison to that, helping and raising a child who just happened to wander into our woods wasn't much of a price at all.

"Ah, about time for you to go back to bed."

Floating in the air and taking a walk as the wind directs... It's pretty enjoyable in its own way, but no doubt a baby can't understand what's so fun about this.

It's not like I can move rapidly or use any sort of thrust to move forward, so no doubt Lady Douve would complain that it's not enjoyable, as it's mainly a method to kill time in a leisurely way without any thrills or sense of speed.

"Suppose I'll head back... Hm?"

An unnatural presence, the presence of wind generated by magic, approaches.

"Sansui! To fly with a baby in your arms! Have you no sense of caution?!"

My colleague, the wind mage Blois, comes bearing a lecture. As she flies using wind to propel herself, she appears in front of me at remarkable speed. I must admit that I'm surprised to see her.

"I'm surprised you found me up here."

"It wasn't easy, I assure you! Land, so we can continue this on the ground."

"Alright, alright... Could you back off a bit? You're buffeting me with your wind gusts."

As an Immortal, I can float in the air through hurricanes and blizzards, unbothered by the rain and snow. However, the unnatural wind and water created by magic tend to badly disrupt my positioning.

I slowly lower my altitude and Blois descends slowly in turn. Both of us land without any fuss.

"Did your master not teach you that, 'flight is dangerous, so don't carry any burdens'?"

"Calm down, Blois. I float using my Immortal Arts. There's nothing particularly dangerous about it. Even a sudden gust of wind won't cause me any issues."

"Even then, it's not something to do while carrying a baby! And what if Lady Douve demands that I fly while carrying her?"

She makes an inarguable point. I suppose a dressing-down is about right for carrying a baby while flying, especially since there wasn't any actual need to fly.

"Look, at the very least we're walking back to the house, alright?"

"Fine, alright..."

It was extremely reassuring to have a colleague willing to fly up and make certain Lain and I were safe.

I may have much to learn about being a father, but it's times like this I realize I'm blessed to have good co-workers. It reminds me to acknowledge my shortcomings and be willing to ask for help when I need it.

Afterword

I would like to sincerely thank you for picking up the first volume of my humble work, “The World’s Least Interesting Master Swordsman.”

This book is a version of the story of the same name found on “Shousetsuka ni Narou” and has been expanded and edited for print.

Whether you are readers of the web novel or are being introduced to this story through the print version, thank you very much for your purchase.

I’m a little embarrassed to admit it, but getting this ready for print was a lot of work.

The amount of writing was certainly a major endeavor, but there was also a lot of effort required to tweak the story format to make it easier for first-time readers to enjoy.

I also asked the illustrator to redraw the pictures several times, and my editors had to edit quite a few of my sentences. It made me realize just how much work is needed to finish a single book.

However, if the book reaches the hands of you, the reader, and you are able to enjoy it, then all of that hard work is worthwhile.

Now, the main character of this work is, in a phrase, an effort-type hero. He’s strong because he put in a lot of effort while being trained by a good instructor, or because he put in more work than other people, or, really, because he did both. The story is primarily about that hero using his strength to win battles.

That means that within the work itself I spend a lot of time praising the value of hard work. However, the hero himself doesn’t really emphasize that effort himself. This is my own view, but I feel hard work is an extremely precious thing, yet it is also the bare minimum you need to put in.

No doubt that Sansui’s years spent training are a form of hard work. But that doesn’t mean that other people haven’t also put in their own hard work. The opponents he defeats must necessarily have also put in their own effort.

In the end, I don’t think hard work and effort are things that are solely reserved for getting stronger. For people who are working, the sweat from their brow as they labor to gain sustenance is a form of effort. The chores that a homemaker does to support their household’s lifestyle are a form of effort.

To me, hard work and effort are things that everyone put in every day of their lives, and the cost that people pay to protect those lives. In many pieces of fiction, the effort put in by people other than the hero is often dismissed, or characters other than the hero don’t put any effort into things at all. Of course, it’s true that there are people who put no hard work or effort into things, but there’s no way that they’re the majority in our society.

As an author, I hope and strive to make this a work where I show the hero's effort and hard work, while I also avoid dismissing the efforts of people other than the hero, and thus respect their hard work and effort, as well as praise the people who put in the hard work and effort, regardless of whether they are allies or enemies.

I wouldn't have been able to turn this work into a book without the help of many people. I'd like to take this opportunity to give thanks to the illustrator, Shiso, who brought my characters to life with their wonderful illustrations; Kuroda of the PASH! Editing department; and Kondo, who gave me advice about how to get this published.

I'd also like to send thanks to my family, who have supported me in my dream of becoming a light novel author, and my grandfather from Okinawa, who saved my life when I was little and thus made this entire thing possible.

Finally, I would like to once again thank all of you, the readers, who were kind enough to purchase this book and read it to the end.

I hope you will join me for the next adventure.

-Rokurou Akashi, A Blessed Day in May, 2018

Bonus Short Story

Let’s Go To Sepaeda

Having had my skills accepted and thus having subsequently been hired on as the bodyguard of Lady Douve of House Sepaeda, I was immediately put on the same carriage as Lady Douve, as though I belonged there, and sent on this leisurely journey to House Sepaeda’s lands.

Evidently, Lady Douve has a difficult personality, and despite being a member of one of the Great Houses, is rarely accompanied by a retinue.

Ordinarily, she’s only accompanied by her bodyguard, Blois, and the elderly gentleman who drives her carriage. In effect, Blois also fills the role of Lady Douve’s maidservant.

However, my baby daughter Lain has also been added to the party. Since Blois, herself a child, can hardly act as Lain’s nursemaid, Lain and her nursemaid are in another carriage, with the party therefore traveling in a convoy of two vehicles.

“How dull… I was hoping to have an opportunity to test the skills of my new bodyguard.”

“Please don’t say such things, Lady Douve.”

As might be expected, the road is actually rather peaceful, mainly because there’s no way the condition of the roads linking the royal capital with the House Sepaeda lands would be dangerous. That, and both of these carriages bear the emblem of House Sepaeda, to boot. It’s a rare bandit who’d have the nerve to strike.

I had actually felt the presence of several groups, each probably bandits, on the journey, but the moment we entered into view, they collectively decide to sit still and watch us pass. While this isn’t the outcome Lady Douve desired, not everyone in the world is as ignorant of matters as I am. Even bandits exercise some discretion in choosing their targets.

At any rate, we arrive at the Sepaeda territories without facing anything worth calling trouble, and for obvious reasons we receive a lavish welcome.

“Welcome home, Lady Douve. It is good to see you, milady.”

“””Welcome home, Lady Douve.”””

To be more precise, Lady Douve received the lavish welcome. It goes without saying, but we arrive at a giant castle, with scores of servants waiting out front.

I’d seen plenty of impressive mansions in the capital, but this castle was impressive even compared to them. Not only was it large, but it was clear that every corner of it was well-maintained. Frankly, it was the sort of place that gave off an air of wealth without anything like a connection to necessity.

“You must be Master Sansui, the gentleman that His Lordship approved as Lady Douve’s bodyguard. His Lordship provided some instructions by post, so if you could step this way…”

An older, distinguished-looking gentleman, who appears to be the butler, addresses me with respect, despite the fact that I don't look much older than a child. At this point, I'm separated from Lady Douve and Blois. The nursemaid carrying Lain has also accompanied them.

I'm ushered into the castle, noticing that it's surrounded by guards, and taken to a particular room.

As I should have expected, there were a number of tailors waiting inside. Equipped with cloth-cutting scissors and tape measures, they begin removing my clothes, with some of them then taking my body measurements, while others begin examining my clothing to see how it was made.

"This is some sloppy work... It's clothing woven by an amateur, not a proper tailor."

"First time I've seen this sort of ethnic outfit. To think there's clothing like this out there..."

"...It looks like it'd be cool in the summer, but wouldn't it be cold in winter?"

They enter a detailed discussion about my clothing. It seems that Lady Douve's father, the Lord of House Sepaeda, has already issued some instructions. The tailors aren't working on making customized Western-style clothing for me, but rather working to remake my exact clothing with new materials.

For whatever it's worth, as an Immortal, I'm not particularly affected by the climate. My condition doesn't change whether it's hot or cold. I've never actually tested it, but I'm sure I'd be fine wandering about naked on a snowy mountain in the dead of winter.

"Anyway...cutting out the pattern won't be hard, so let's get to work."

A kimono crafted by the elite of the elite of the tailoring world... They worked with such speed and precision that it looked like magic to me, completing a brand-new kimono without much delay on my part. Crafted by skilled tailors using materials from skilled fabric weavers, this new kimono puts the one I made from scratch, fabric and all, to shame.

"It's very comfortable. Thank you very much."

"We're very glad to hear it."

After thanking the tailors for their work, they step back. By the way, they also take away my old kimono; no doubt they're going to throw it away.

It's been over five hundred years since I've come to this world, but I'm probably the only Japanese transferee who's ever had his clothes handled so roughly.

As I ponder this, a different craftsman appears in the room.

"Pardon. If you could remove your shoes, please."

Seems the next person is a cobbler. She removes my sandals and begins investigating my "shoes."

As I’m considered an uncultured savage, I’ve had my clothing replaced with handcrafted replacements made by master craftsmen. Since I spent decades in the mountains swinging a stick, I suppose a savage is more or less what I am. I mean, my old clothes that I had brought with me from Japan hadn’t even lasted ten years, never mind a century.

Now a little closer to a civilized being, I’m again being ushered around by a butler-like person. I sense the presence of Lain, in addition to Lady Douve and Blois, at my destination. There were a few other presences I didn’t know. It doesn’t look like they’re in combat, so they’re probably just family.

“Relatives of Lady Douve... His Brothership and His Fathership, huh...”

I can’t help but have a bad feeling about this. His Brothership and His Fathership had already tried to find a random excuse to kill me. Lady Douve, who knew that would happen, tried to hire me anyway.

Bluntly speaking, they’re not the sort to hide their hostility. So just what sort of relatives would these be...?

“Begging your pardon, ladies. I have brought Master Sansui.”

The butler opens the door to the room, where three women, including Lady Douve, are relaxing. Blois is also standing behind Lady Douve in her customary position.

As for Lain, she’s fast asleep, carried by a woman I’m now seeing for the first time.

“Oh, so you’re Sansui?”

“Yes, Lady Minke. He’s my new bodyguard.”

“Mm, you really are as young as she says.”

The woman holding Lain looks me over, clearly surprised. Given that Lady Douve addressed her with her with an honorific, she must have a certain amount of status.

I’m not sure if I’m supposed to bow, salute, or kneel in situations like this. For the moment, I start with a bow. I don’t think I’m doing anything out of the ordinary.

“A pleasure to meet you, milady. I am Shirokuro Sansui.”

“Oh my… You needn’t be so formal.”

The lady tries to put me at ease. She probably thinks that I, a child — clearly a foreigner based on my appearance — am in a mild panic, somewhere between anxiety and fear at the thought of offending my new employers.

I’m sorry, but I’m actually a man who’s over five hundred years old and hiding his age. Even though I was sent to another world, I never expected to be confused for being younger than I am based purely on my appearance. Kind of a late realization, I must admit.

“Sansui, this is my brother’s wife, Lady Minke Sepaeda. And this is my mother, Lady Althe Sepaeda. Be sure to be on your best behavior.”

I can’t help but be a little surprised at the fact that the absent His Brothership is married. I guess it’s natural, given that he’s a noble and heir

to the house, but it's still surprising that someone who is so protective of his sister would actually be married.

"I've been taking the liberty of holding your daughter. I simply had the urge to hold a baby for the first time in a while. My apologies."

"Not at all. No doubt Lain is happy to be held by you."

Based on her statement, I guess His Brothership even has children. This is definitely not a world I would ever have imagined to be possible.

Still, it seems that they've exchanged information about my daughter Lain, as well, and they don't plan on mentioning that she and I are clearly not of the same ethnicity. Information-sharing is a wonderful thing.

"We have received word from my husband and my son concerning you. They say you are a very skilled duelist."

Unlike the Lady Minke, who exudes an air of gentle calm, Lady Douve's mother, Lady Althe, has a very severe gaze. In fact, she has an air identical to His Fathership.

"My husband and my son both have a skill at arms worthy of the current lord of a martial house and his heir. That you easily defeated them is a testament to your skill."

"You honor me."

"However, the fact that they have approved of your hiring does not mean I will do the same. I will also be testing your skills. That does mean you will have to accept the consequences of failure."

"M-Mother?!"

"Silence. This concerns my daughter's life. His Lordship, my son, and Douve have all accepted the terms."

Lady Minke seems at a loss, unable to keep up with the hard-core martial family traditions of House Sepaeda. However, Lady Althe makes a fair point, leading me to simply accept her demand.

"Lady Douve has hired me as a bodyguard. As such, all there is for me to do is to accept all threats to Lady Douve, no matter when or where they may come from."

"A fine answer. Come to the courtyard. Also… You two will be waiting here."

Lady Althe, with the aura of an Amazonian queen, stands and leads me to the courtyard. Lady Douve appears to want to follow, and Lady Minke appears to want to stop us, but neither seem able to challenge the current lady of the House.

There's no reason for Blois, Lady Douve's bodyguard, to move from her position and Lain, held by Lady Minke, is clearly not going to say anything, so only Lady Althe and I leave the room.

"Age has nothing to do with talent. Blois proves that with her ability," Lady Althe explains in a clipped tone on the way. Thinking about it, these harsh critics have accepted Blois's ability and left Lady Douve's safety to her alone, which is truly impressive.

“However, Douve is my beloved daughter. I must be sure of anyone who is assigned to protect her.”

In the courtyard there are several score fully armed knights, and ten prisoners locked in cages as though they’re large animals. That was enough information to give me a good guess about what the test would entail.

“They are prisoners sentenced to death. They were once skilled mercenaries, and aside from their loyalties, they are capable soldiers. For the sake of fairness, they have been provided their desired meals for the last week. All of them are in decent physical condition.”

That’s going to quite a bit of trouble for this test. It’s not a great way to put it, but it also means they’re all opponents who I can kill without issue.

“A number of them can use magic. I will not tell you how many or which ones have that ability. With that in mind, defend me, as though I am Douve, without troubling the knights.”

She’s really putting herself out there on this one. Even if she’s got knights for protection in the worst-case scenario, it’s still risky to put herself out in front of a bunch of condemned prisoners.

At Lady Althe’s direction, the knights open the cages and release the prisoners.

“Choose your favored weapons and armor. Once equipped, kill this child. You need not attack one by one; attack all at once. If any of you can kill him, regardless of which of you accomplishes it, all of you will be pardoned.”

I guess she draws the line at telling them to attack her. Well, that’s to be expected. Whatever the case, I look over the prisoners arming themselves. They’re mainly arming themselves with metal weapons without any hesitation while looking over at us and chuckling boorishly. They’re plenty dangerous, and can certainly stand in as a threat to Lady Douve.

“No doubt you’re aware, but no matter what happens to you, there will be no one to help you.”

“Understood.”

Drawing my wooden sword, I face off against a group of prisoners while surrounded by knights.

The prisoners have completely underestimated me, happy to gain the opportunity to go free simply by killing a poorly-equipped brat. It’s best to take them down while they’re still under that mistaken impression.

“Can I consider this test to have started?”

“Yes, do as you wish.”

When I hear those words, I use my Flash Step to move directly among the prisoners.

Appearing in their midst before they even realize I’ve vanished, I thrust my sword at one’s throat. It’s a spot that’s hard to protect, even while wearing armor and a helmet. I land a precise blow on that spot and take the first one down.

“Gu-uh!”

The Flash Step doesn't make any noise. With my small stature and their overconfidence, they don't have the sense of urgency that comes from real pitched battle. As such, taking down the first one was easy, and it was still easy as I landed a blow on the second prisoner's throat.

"Ah…guh?!"

The second one noticed me, at least. He reacts with shock as the first target tips over, then is even more shocked at my sudden appearance. Of course, he takes the blow without being able to muster up any meaningful response.

"W-What the hell!? When did he—"

"Dammit, kill him!"

"We're damned anyway, if we can't kill….guh!"

As the others finally realize that I've disappeared from in front of Lady Althe, they're stunned to find two of their fellow prisoners are already down and begin to hurriedly prepare for battle. However, that's meaningless with my Flash Step in play. I circle behind each of them in turn, hitting them in the back of the head with a single strike. Even wearing helmets, taking an unguarded blow from a Ki-Infused wooden sword is still enough to knock them unconscious.

"I've put all ten of them down. If you wish them killed, I will do so now."

After taking down the prisoners, I return to report to Lady Althe. She and the knights are looking on in surprise as they finally realize what has just transpired. It should be easy for anyone to see that the unconscious prisoners are easy enough to kill. I don't feel the need to do so in front of a gentlewoman, even though, as condemned prisoners, they'll all be executed eventually.

"…No, that is quite enough. There is no need to kill them here. Impressive. I will accept that you have the skill needed to protect my daughter. Although, truth be told, it was in a different manner than what I expected."

There was not a shred of showmanship in the fight. In the end, it didn't matter how many of them or which of them could use magic. Still, there's no room for criticism if I take them all down before they can act. It was best for Lady Althe's safety to not let them do anything.

"Still, why do you fight with a wooden sword?"

"I'm used to it. And if I used a steel sword, I would have had their blood on my clothing."

I check to make sure there's nothing dirtying my newly-made clothes and sandals, then place my nearly unsullied wooden sword back in my sash.

"Mother, you've returned rather quickly. Was there a problem?"

"No, everything went well."

Lady Althe and I return a few moments later to the original room, still dressed in the same clothing. Since all we really did was go to the courtyard

and return, I can understand why the worried Lady Minke would draw that conclusion.

By contrast, Lady Douve's lips are quirked up in a satisfied smirk. She seems to have sensed that her mother had been a bit shaken by the ludicrous skill of her bodyguard.

Her personality is a bit of a problem. I'm already worried Lain might end up like her.

"Douve, you always do seem to draw talent to you."

"Thank you. I'm glad you approve, Mother."

While I understand Lady Althe's desire to make certain of her daughter's physical safety, I have to wonder if it's presumptuous to think Lady Althe should also worry about Lady Douve's personality as well? I'm a bit worried for Lady Douve's future.

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The World’s Least Interesting Master Swordsman: Volume 1
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